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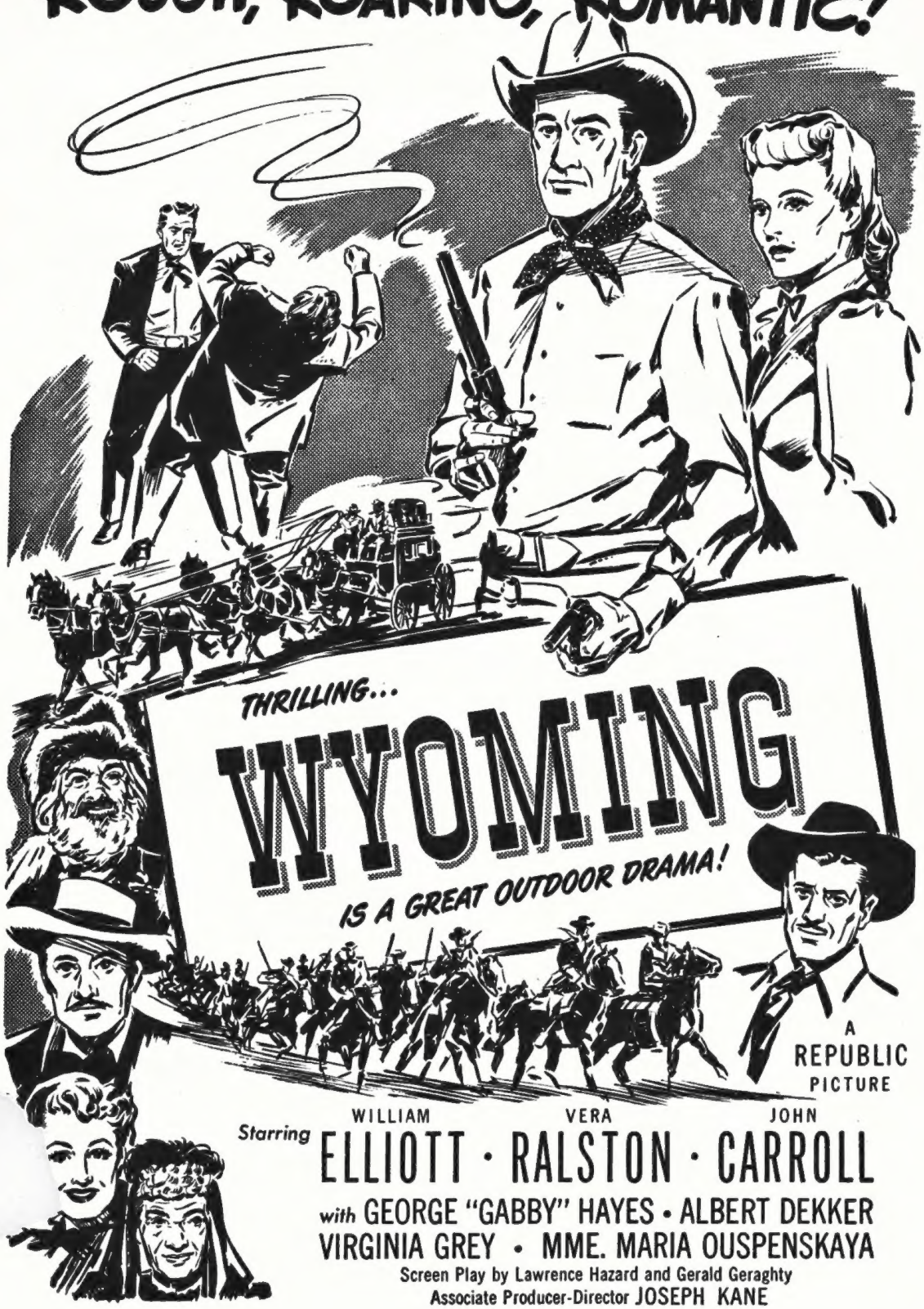

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Vol. XXXIII, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION December, 1947

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By W. C. TUTTLE

When this two-fisted ranny plays along with a double-crossing game, it's pretty certain that there's a blazing gunsmoke showdown coming—and too fast for the comfort of renegades! 13

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THE THIRTEENTH MOON ..... Tom Gunn 60

Sheriff Blue Steele and Deputy Shorty Watts of Painted Post need more than their flaming six-guns to solve the mystery when Chow Now is robbed!

THE STUBBORN FOOL ..... Joseph Chadwick 84

Case-hardened by his experiences in warfare, Jeff Keyes rides back to his home ranch valley to climb up two sides of a hate-hot triangle of death!

Short Stories

BULLET MUSIC ..... Andrew Bronson 43

Buck Hartly proves that a concertina can be a dangerous weapon

HAM'S LONG SHOT ..... Alfred L. Garry 49

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GUN BAIT ..... Ted Fox 77

Cowardice forced ex-Sheriff Tex Fleming into one losing fight, but—

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Craven was filled with bitter hatred—and ready to fight!

and

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The HOME CORRAL

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HOWDY, hombres and hombresses! Back in pioneer days, men of daring took off for beyond the Rockies to improve their way of life. Some found what they wanted. Others didn't and returned home, bitter and disappointed.

Today venturesome folks are drifting West in far greater numbers than ever before in history. Their opportunity is as good or better than it was in covered-wagon days, minus those early hardships and dangers. Nonetheless, heaps of them are doomed to failure. Why? Well, folks, that's what I aim to tell you about in this get-together of The Home Corral.

Once I heard city folks called "fractions of human beings." On account of the dismal half-lives that so many modern humans lead in the crowded, noisy, hurrying centers of population. If they were chained to such an empty existence, like ancient slaves, you'd feel sorry for 'em. But nobody in free America needs to be an unwilling slave.

The trouble is, a good share of such people don't want what they want bad enough to go out and get it. I reckon that's why the foreign-born usually make the best settlers. They're so plum fed up with their pinched, miserable lives in the old country that any change, any prospect of betterment, fills them with hope and ambition.

The "Human Fractions"

But it's the "human fractions" that move West only to find themselves as bad off or worse than they were before, they're the ones we're talking about. So that you Home Corralers, hankering for a change, can avoid their mistakes.

There probably never was a better time to shuck off old environment and find a new one. But mistakes are easy to make. I meet up with these people, me living footloose as I do. I know their general background, their dreams and their likely destiny about as well as anybody, I reckon.

Census figures tally with my own observations in showing that about three out of every four Americans live in big cities, and have most of all their lives. The city habit is hard to break. That's where most Western newcomers make their first big mistake. They leave one city and go to another.

That's a specially serious mistake these

days because Western big cities are more crowded than Eastern ones and living conditions are a lot more difficult. Why? Because Western cities are growing faster. The demand is greater for housing, schooling, food, medical attention, recreation and every other human need. Right now, same as in pioneer times, disappointed homeseekers are leaving Western big cities in droves. A good many are backtracking for home, sorry they ever left.

The truth is, folks, that civic leaders from Seattle to Los Angeles, from Denver to San Francisco, are groping for some way to warn away the incoming hordes.

Stampede to Los Angeles

The main stampede is toward Los Angeles. There are figures to prove it. But let's skip those, just at present. Instead, let's inquire, why this stampede to the big cities? We use Los Angeles as an illustration, but what we say applies in general to other places, too.

The main appeal of Los Angeles is climate, always has been. Close to mountains, seashore and desert, outdoor life is enjoyable any month in the year. It's a hub for rich, famous people who are able to live anywhere else they might choose. It commands huge mineral and agricultural resources in wide variety. In and around are the most productive oil fields in the world. It has a busy seaport and thus is the gateway and main distributing center for the wealth of the wide

(Continued on page 8)

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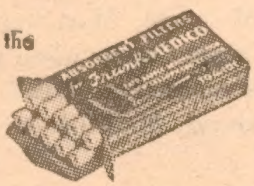

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THE HOME CORRAL

(Continued from page 6)

Southwest. Important commercially, Los Angeles in war years quickly grew to be a leading industrial city, an aircraft center and manufacturing capital.

In past boomtimes, growth came only in short spurts. Because folks couldn't live on climate alone. Employment was limited and pay was lower than back East.

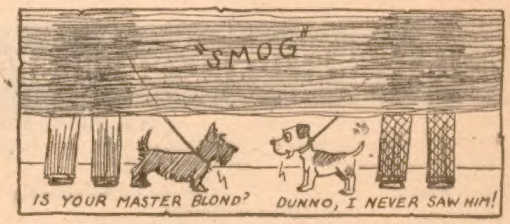
Jobs are easy to find now in any line, the scale of wages up. The State public school system ranks as one of the best in the nation. Benefits for the aged and unemployed are more generous than elsewhere. Cultural advantages bloom on every side, like the all-year flower gardens. There are colleges of high standing, well-endowed universities and southern California has become a stronghold of art, music and literature.

Pretty rosy prospect?

Sure. It's the ideal place to take root, raise a family and enjoy the best that life has to offer. But let's look a little deeper, hombres and hombresses.

One Third of a State

This scattered, sprawling city and its close-in suburbs already contain nearly ONE OUT OF THREE California residents! This little fly speck on the map is past the two million



mark. By comparison, the entire State of Nevada, with less than 200,000 population, hasn't even one person to ten that live in and around Los Angeles.

Climate? It's still there, climate and sunshine. But it's high above the eternal pall of brownish smoke that overhangs today's city. "Smog", they call it, a continual cloud caused by dense traffic, by chemical fumes produced by giant industry and by other contributing conditions caused by intense congestion.

To escape it you must travel 50 miles or farther from the metropolitan center. Lots of folks can't stand it. Smog control has been studied for several years. So far no

(Continued on page 10)

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THE HOME CORRAL

(Continued from page 8)

relief has been discovered, though some progress has been made.

Distances are great in this scattered city. Public transportation is slow. Thousands of workers spend two to four hours each day traveling 10 to 20 miles between homes and jobs, under trying and uncertain conditions that consume their leisure hours.

About Ocean Bathing

Weekend travel on streets and highways in many Western big cities reaches a peak of traffic that causes many fatal accidents. Where to go is a growing problem. For many miles the beaches are virtually all bought up, the public barred from them, in many areas by high wire fences.

All told, free recreational facilities are fast vanishing and very little is being done to

provide more. On the famous Malibu coast, there's a quarter-mile of ocean frontage left for non-owners. You pay a $100 per year family membership to enjoy the privileges.

Housing in Cities

Housing? Renting a place to live in any big city borders on the impossible. Even trailer parks are jammed beyond capacity, with hopelessly long waiting lists. Space rentals cost up to $30 a month, in some cases more. Desperate for some place to light, trailer buyers pay from $500 to $1,000 premium to buy a trailer that occupies a camp space. Discouraged trailer newcomers are leaving cities in herds.

To buy a home in a big city is even a tougher proposition. Home prices have always been at a speculative figure and in anticipation of their value. They are now at a fantastic height, beyond the means of most workers' incomes. Building lots are numerous. But you can't build without a priority, veteran or otherwise. Even with full access to building material, the cost of home build-

(Continued on page 104)

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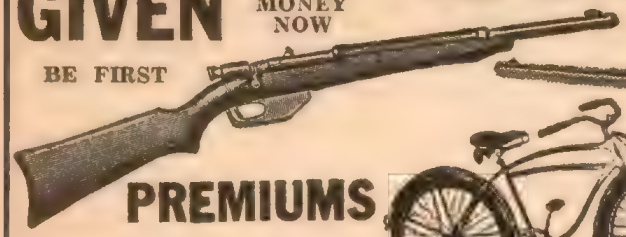

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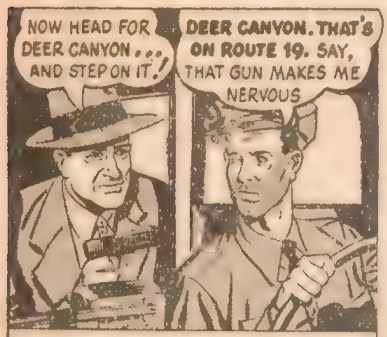
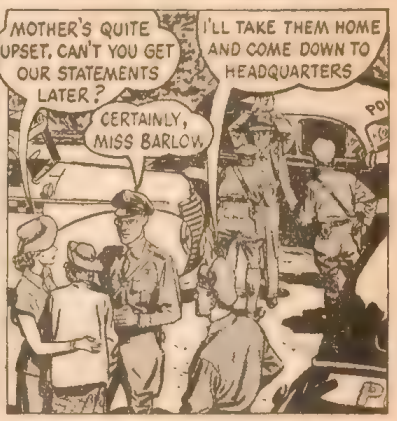
IT LOOKED LIKE TROUBLE UNTIL . . .

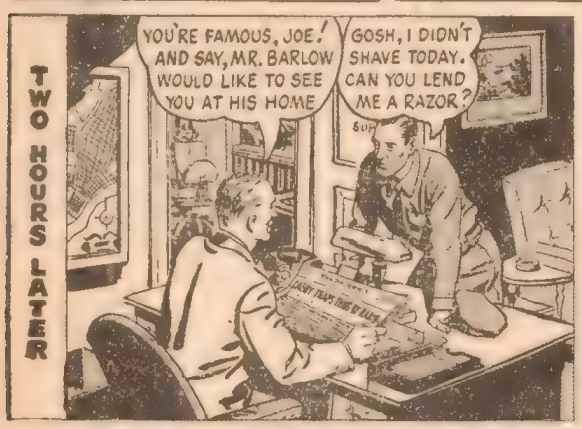
HIS TAXI NEWLY EQUIPPED WITH TWO-WAY RADIO, JOE DOUGLAS IS REPORTING TO HIS GARAGE AT THE END OF A LONG DAY BEHIND THE WHEEL WHEN HIS REAR VISION MIRROR SHOWS . . .

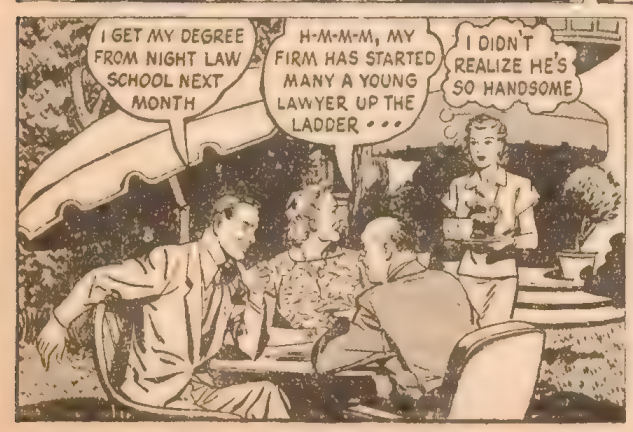


LEAVING THE OPEN RADIO MIKE ON HIS LAP, JOE REPEATS THE UNSUSPECTING THUG'S INSTRUCTIONS . . .

. . . TO HIS GARAGE, WHERE THE SUPERINTENDENT RELAYS THEM TO THE POLICE


MOTHER'S QUITE UPSET. CAN'T YOU GET OUR STATEMENTS LATER?
CERTAINLY, MISS BARLOW.
I'LL TAKE THEM HOME AND COME DOWN TO HEADQUARTERS


TWO HOURS LATER
YOU'RE FAMOUS, JOE! AND SAY, MR. BARLOW WOULD LIKE TO SEE YOU AT HIS HOME
GOSH, I DIDN'T SHAVE TODAY. CAN YOU LEND ME A RAZOR?


I GET MY DEGREE FROM NIGHT LAW SCHOOL NEXT MONTH
H-M-M-M, MY FIRM HAS STARTED MANY A YOUNG LAWYER UP THE LADDER . . .
I DIDN'T REALIZE HE'S SO HANDSOME

FOR SMOOTHER, MORE REFRESHING SHAVES WITH A MONEY-SAVING BLADE, TRY THIN GILLETTES. THEY ARE BY FAR THE KEENEST AND LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. PRECISION-MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR EXACTLY, THIN GILLETTES PROTECT YOU FROM THE IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES. ALWAYS ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
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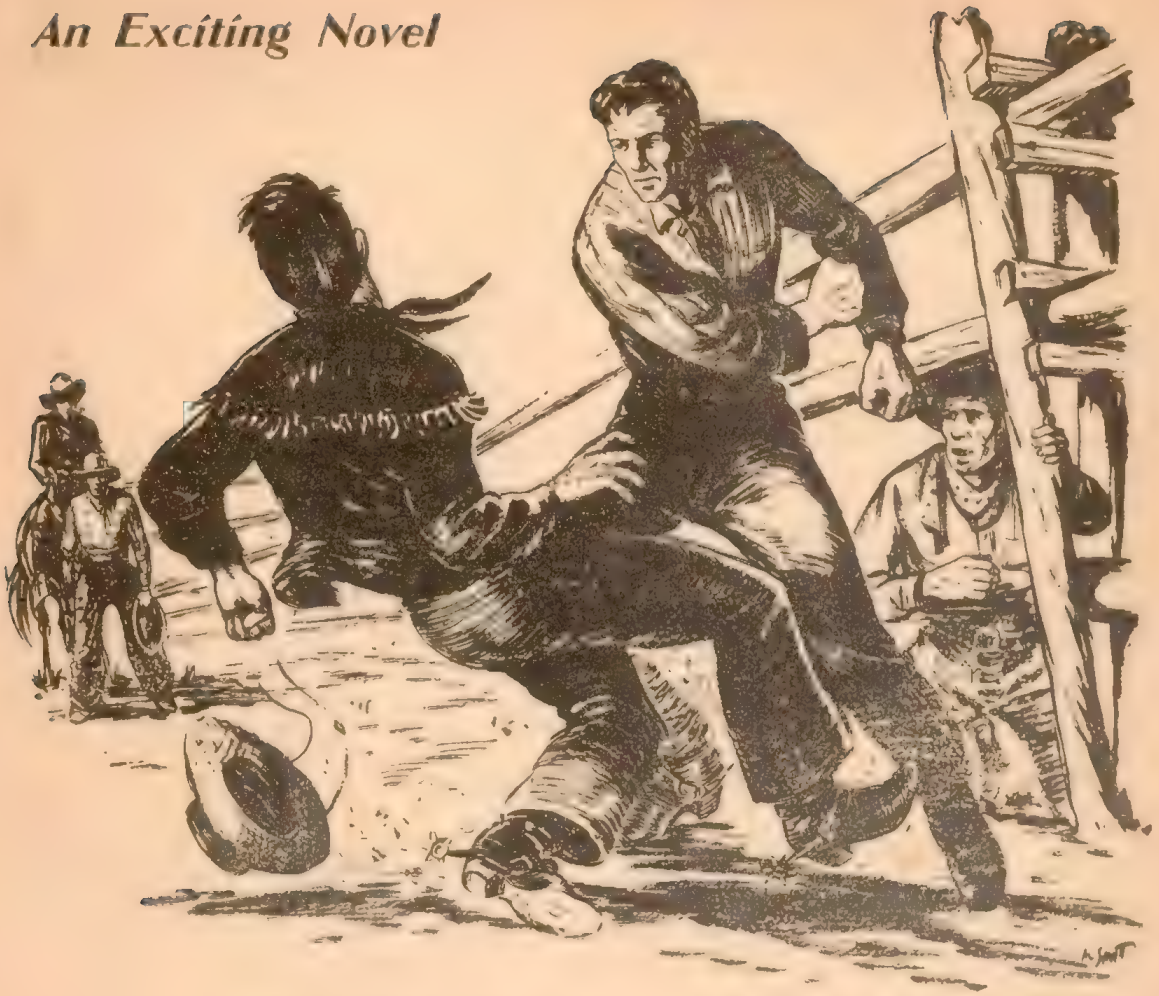

Silver brought his right fist around in a flashing, looping hook

The Saga of SILVER MALONE

By W. C. TUTTLE

When this two-fisted ranny plays along with a doublecrossing game, there's a blazing gunsmoke showdown coming—and fast!

CHAPTER I

Easy Money

SILVER MALONE shoved ten dollars on a roulette number, and watched the wheel spin away the last cent he had. No one could have guessed that it was his last cent. He merely turned away from the roulette layout, and sauntered over to the long bar, his face as inscrutable as though carved from granite.

Silver Malone was well over six feet tall, lean as a hound, and even in his high-heel boots he moved with the ease of a hunting wolf. His eyes were in the

deep shadow of his sombrero, but the hat-brim failed to hide the scars on his cheeks and chin. Women never failed to turn and look at Silver Malone, but he did not pay any attention to them.

He had lost a small fortune in that Nevada saloon and gambling house, but his expression never changed. He wore a gray suit, gray shirt, black sombrero and high-heel boots. Silver Malone was barely past thirty years of age, but he seemed older.

Parker Bond, a lawyer, had watched Silver Malone for two days, and he was standing at the long bar, as Malone came over there. Parker Bond was short, fat, heavy-jowled, shrewd-eyed. He dressed in black with white linen, and carried a cane. This was not Bond's country; he was from Arizona. After two days of watching Silver Malone, he felt the urge to find out more about the fellow. Bond had a job for the right man.

Silver came up to the bar beside Bond, and sent a roulette chip spinning across it.

"What's yours?" asked the bartender.

"A tall glass of cold water," replied Malone. He had a particularly musical baritone voice.

The bartender looked curiously at him, but filled a glass with ice water and slid it across the bar.

"That chip is worth two drinks, Mr. Malone," he said quietly.

Silver Malone glanced at Bond. "Have a drink, pardner," he said.

"Thank you, sir," replied Parker Bond. "My card."

Silver Malone glanced at the card and shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't reckon I need a lawyer—now," he said quietly.

"Nor ever, I hope, sir. My regards."

They nodded and drank. The bartender moved away to serve other customers. Malone stared at himself in the back-bar mirror, the empty glass in his fingers.

Parker Bond said quietly, "Silver Malone, would you like to make some easy money?"

The tall man looked keenly at him for several moments.

"You knew my name," he said.

"The bartender told me. Are you curious about my question?"

"Money?" Silver Malone's lips twisted a little. "Oh, yeah, that's the stuff I've been tossin' across that layout. Easy money? If it's lawful money—yes."

Parker Bond smiled slowly. "This," he said quietly, "is no place to talk this over. Come up to my room—just across the street. We won't be overheard."

"It ain't honest money, eh?"

"The law couldn't touch you, my boy. Shall we proceed?"

Silver Malone studied the short, fat lawyer thoughtfully.

"Perhaps, another drink—" Bond suggested.

"Not even water," replied Malone. "Business and liquor never mix."

"You are a smart man, Malone."

"You can cut that one back with the rusties," said Malone quickly. "If I was smart, I wouldn't be broke."

THEY went over to Bond's room in a little hotel. It wasn't a very nice room. There was only one chair, so Bond sat on the old, brass bed, while Silver Malone sat gingerly on the old rocker.

"What's yore proposition?" asked Malone.

"Before we go into that," replied Bond, "I'd like to ask you a few personal questions, Malone. It is hardly ethical out in this country to ask a man where he is from, but a lot depends—"

"Suppose," suggested Malone, "that I told yuh I was from Montana, Wyomin', Dakota—most any place where they raise cows."

"That would be very suitable—very. Have you ever been in Arizona?"

"I went through there on a train once," Malone said.

"Good, good!" exclaimed Parker Bond. "Do you know anybody in that state?"

"I wouldn't know that, Bond, because I don't know who lives there."

"That suits me. I'm going to put up a proposition to you, Malone; and you can take it or leave it. I'm not going to tell you names nor places. I happen to be attorney for an old man, who owns a very valuable ranch, and cattle. This old man is almost totally blind and in bad health. He has two relatives, a son and a niece. He hasn't heard from the son in ten or more years. This son would be about your age, I presume. The niece is now at the ranch, helping to take care of him.

"His will leaves everything to his son,

Silver leaped to the doorway as a rider whirled his horse away from the end of the hitch-rack

and no one knows where his son is—whether he is alive or dead. Unfortunately, we do not know anything about this son. We don't even know why he disappeared. I've tried to induce the old man to change his will, leaving everything to his niece, but he is a very stubborn person. If he dies, and the son does not claim the inheritance within the statute of limitations on such things, the state will take the property. We do not want this to happen."

"Well," said Silver Malone, "I don't know why you should be so concerned, Bond. After all, you get paid for yore services."

"Listen, Malone, I want that ranch. There are twenty-five thousand acres of grazing land, and an undeveloped gold mine, not to mention a fortune in white-faced cows, horses, buildings and all that. I've worked out this scheme. The old man is blind and sick. The doctor says he can't live another year. See the idea?"

Silver Malone's agate-hard eyes bored into the shifty orbs of the small-town lawyer. It made Bond squirm a little.

"Bond," he said quietly, "you are askin' me to impersonate that son?"

"Yes," whispered the lawyer.

"What a fool you are! Why, that man would know I'm not his son. You're crazy, Bond. Even if the old man can't see, don't yuh realize that I couldn't answer the questions he'd ask me? You admit that you don't know anythin' about his son. I wouldn't touch it."

"Wait!" begged Bond. "He won't ask questions. He's too sick to ask questions. Why, half the time he isn't in his right mind. How he lasted this long is a mystery. Nobody in this town has ever seen his son."

Silver Malone got up and went to a front window, looking out on the street. Finally he came back and sat down.

"What's in this job for me, Bond?" he asked.

"If it is a success—ten thousand cold dollars."

"What's the spread worth?"

"The value of the spread has nothing to do with my offer."

Silver Malone sat there, chin in his cupped hands, staring at the threadbare carpet. A shaft of light through a window accentuated the scars on his face. Bond wondered if he was making a mistake in offering this delicate job to a man like that. After all, he knew nothing about Silver Malone.

"There's a lot of things to figure out," muttered Malone.

"I'm a lawyer," reminded Bond.

"Yea-a-ah—a crooked lawyer," said Silver Malone. "Give me until tomorrow Bond. I want to think things out."

"Good, good! I have to leave here by tomorrow evening. Come here by noon tomorrow. Can I loan you a few dollars?"

"I never borrow money," replied Silver Malone, and walked out.

Parker Bond wasn't exactly satisfied with his man. There was no doubt in his mind that Silver Malone had the cold nerve to handle the job, but could Silver Malone be handled afterwards?

It meant a lot of money to Parker Bond. There had been no mention of what Silver Malone was to do after he had inherited the ranch, but it seemed that they both understood that Parker Bond would get the property, and Silver Malone would get ten thousand dollars. Parker Bond was not alone in this deal, but he preferred to be the front man in all negotiations. However, he was not going to tell Malone any further details, until the whole scheme was settled between them.

Bond went back down to the little lobby. Several men were there. As Bond sat down to smoke a cigar, he heard one of them say, "Well, he must have lost at least three thousand on the roulette wheel in two days, but you wouldn't know it."

Another man asked a question, but Bond didn't hear it. The other man replied, "No, I don't know much about him. One of the bartenders is from up along the Canadian Border, and he said that Malone made a lot of money, stealin' horses and smugglin' 'em across into Canada. It may not be true, I dunno. Anyway, I figger he'd make a better friend than enemy."

The men moved away. Parker Bond smiled over his cigar. Horse thief from the north, eh? Well, that sounded good. Maybe he hadn't made any mistake, after all.

IT WAS late afternoon in the railroad town of Gold Butte, and the stage was loading for its twenty-five mile grind to Sunset Wells, the main outfitting point for the Broken Arrow range. "Buck",

Young, the old stage-driver, was busy, lashing things on the boot. He had four passengers this evening. Silver Malone leaned against a porch post at the stage depot, and idly watched Buck tie on his load.

A girl came from the station and climbed into the stage. Silver shifted his eyes to her, and their eyes met, as she stepped into the old stage. Silver's wide, thin lips went just a bit thinner. He knew this girl, and he felt that she knew him. With all the rest of the wide world for them to travel in, why did she have to be in Gold Butte, taking the same stage with him?

He couldn't quite remember her name, but it was Mazie, or something like that. She had been a singer in a Montana honky-tonk. It boded no good for his masquerade, because she knew him as Silver Malone. Buck Young came past Silver, coiling a rope.

"We're ready t' roll, pardner," said Buck.

Two other men got into the stage. One was a whisky salesman, and the other had all the earmarks of a gambler. There was only room for four passengers to ride comfortably inside the stage. The drummer sat beside the girl, while Silver and the gambler occupied the opposite seat, facing them. Silver pulled his hat low over his eyes as he got in. The girl was looking through one of the dirty, dusty side windows, paying no attention to any of them. The old stage went creaking out of Gold Butte, heading south.

"Ever been over this road before?" asked the gambler.

Silver shook his head. The girl turned from the window and looked at him, as though trying to place him. He had a face that would not be hard to remember.

"I have," the salesman said, grinning, "and with this same driver."

"I wouldn't call him a driver," said the gambler, "I'd call him a herder. He hasn't missed a rut or a rock in years."

The salesman laughed heartily. "I rode on the seat with him on one trip a year ago," he said. "That is, I intended to, but I got thrown off, about half-way to Sunset Wells. Crippled me up for two weeks."

The girl didn't seem interested in their conversation. Silver watched her narrowly from under the down-pulled brim of his big sombrero. She was pretty, and she looked young. She was dressed neatly and sensibly, too. He wondered if she had married some rancher. Maybe she wouldn't thank him for recognizing her now. Suited him fine. Anyway, it was no crime to be a honky-tonk singer. Silver shut his eyes and leaned back against the seat.

Parker Bond had given Silver instructions. He was to take the afternoon stage from Gold Butte to Sunset Wells. It would be late when the stage would arrive. Parker Bond would meet him near the hotel, and they would go to his office, where Bond would tell him the rest of the scheme. On the boot of the stage was Silver's warbag, the wardrobe trunk of a drifting cowboy. In it were his gun and belt, chaps, spurs, and range clothes.

It was a terrible road, and it was ten o'clock when the stage and its four weary horses drew up at the stage depot in Sunset Wells. Silver got his warbag, and headed down the street, walking slowly. That girl was ahead of him, and he saw Parker Bond in the lights of a saloon near the hotel. He saw Bond tip his hat to the girl, who went on.

As Silver came close to him, the lawyer said, "My office is across the street. You follow me in a few minutes; we mustn't be seen together."

Silver waited a reasonable length of time and then joined Bond in his little office. The shades were down, and Bond locked the door. He roomed at the rear of the office; so he took Silver back there.

Bond seemed greatly relieved to know that Silver had arrived, and was ready to continue their scheme.

"The old man is still alive," he told Silver. "That much is in our favor. If he was dead, we'd have an awful time trying to prove that you are his son."

"Yeah, I reckon so," said Silver. "By the way, yuh spoke to a girl who came on the stage with me."

The lawyer grinned at Silver. "I meant to ask you if she rode with you. She is Nora French, the old man's niece. She is the one I told you about, Silver. Rather pretty, don't you think?"

Silver's eyes narrowed. Nora French —the old man's niece. He said, "Maybe she knows the man's son."

"No, she don't. Never saw him in her life. We tried to get the old man to

change the will in her favor, but he's stubborn. She helps take care of him. You'll like Nora."

"Outside of that," said Silver quietly, "I'd like to hear the rest of the deal. Then it'll be up to me, I reckon."

"That's true. The man is old Tom French, and the spread is the Rafter F. French must be about sixty-five. His wife died years ago. Ask me all the questions you can, and I'll try to answer."

"How long did his son live here?" asked Silver.

"His son never was here, Silver. French made his money in New Mexico, but sold out there and bought the ranch that he named the Rafter F. He has been here about ten years, and he has made money."

"Bond," he said quietly, "do yuh realize what a tough job yuh've cut out for me? You can't tell me anythin' about this son. If we knew why he left home, where he was headin'—if there was trouble between him and his father—anythin' to base it on. You don't reckon he'll accept me, if I just say, 'Here I am, papa.'"

"Maybe. His mind isn't right, and he can't see you. Silver, it is a chance we've got to take. If he thinks you are his son, I don't believe he'll ask any proof."

Silver's lips twisted slightly, as though he had tasted something rather sour, and he asked, "What's my name, Bond?"

"Jimmy French. And, for heaven's sake, don't forget it."

"Jimmy French. So I'm a cousin of that girl on the stage."

"To all intents and purpose—yes. But don't get any ideas, Silver. She's been going with Slim Carson, foreman of the Diamond B, which happens to belong to me. Slim is a fine boy, but rather quick on the temper. If I were you, I'd steer clear of Nora."

"Women don't interest me, Bond," said Silver coldly. "So yuh own a spread, eh?"

"Yes. I picked it up several years ago—at a bargain—and I've done all right. I happen to know that Cal Harbin, foreman of the Rafter F, will be in town in the morning. I'll tell him about you, and you can ride out there with him. Now, don't lose your nerve. It means ten thousand dollars to you—you know. Just put yourself in the place of that missing son. Do what he would do, Silver."

Silver Malone nodded thoughtfully. Then he said, "How did I find out about the Rafter F? Somebody will ask."

"You came to Gold Butte with a load of cows. They feed and water in Gold Butte. You heard your father's name mentioned, and started an investigation. Well, you know what I mean. Then you left the train and came down here. Does that sound all right?"

"Well," sighed Silver, "it sounds as good as the rest of the lies we've framed up. I'm going to get a bed at the hotel. See yuh in the mornin', Bond. I hope you sleep better than I prob'ly will."

"Don't worry," smiled Bond. "You've got the nerve to make it."

CHAPTER II

Foreman of the Rafter F

CAL HARBIN came to Sunset Wells next morning, and found Silver Malone in the little restaurant, eating breakfast. Harbin introduced himself. Harbin was a big, hard-fisted cowman.

"So yuh're Jim French," the foreman said.

"That's the name, Harbin," replied Silver easily.

They didn't shake hands. Harbin got the ranch mail, and they pulled out for the ranch. Silver kept his room at the hotel and left his warbag there. About half-way out to the ranch Harbin stopped the team in the shade of some cottonwoods.

"Pardner, me and you are goin' to have a little talk," he said quietly.

"I like to talk," said Silver soberly.

"I suppose Bond has told yuh everythin' yuh ought to know."

Silver looked curiously at the big cowman.

"Bond?" he asked.

"I'm part of that deal, pardner," said Harbin.

"Good. Maybe you can tell me a few things that Bond didn't."

"Yeah—and you'll need to know 'em. I came from New Mexico with Tom

French, when he moved his outfit here, and I knew Jimmy French."

"That's great. Bond didn't know anythin'."

"That's right. For instance, Bond don't know that Jimmy French was convicted for murder and sent up for twenty years. He didn't know that Jimmy French escaped from the law, and ain't been seen since."

"No—he—didn't," whispered Silver. "Bond don't know this?"

"No. Me and my wife and Tom French are the only ones in this part of the country who do know it."

Silver laughed shortly. "I'm kinda glad yuh're in on the deal."

"If I wasn't—you'd last quick. Yuh're in a bad spot, my friend. Just make up yore mind to play square with us, and yuh'll do all right, but if yuh double-cross us, yuh'll serve out that twenty years that the law gave Jimmy French."

"I see-e-e," said Silver thoughtfully. "Well, all I ask is that Bond pays me what he promised."

"That," said Harbin, "is between you and Bond. And another thing, my friend; I'm pretty close to Tom French. You let me tell him that Jimmy is back, before you go in to see him. His mind is like that."

"Do yuh think I can fool him, Harbin?"

"He can't see what yuh look like—and I've done told him yuh're comin'."

"Much obliged, Harbin—that makes it easier."

They went on to the ranch. It was a big place—this Rafter F. The rambling old ranchhouse was part adobe, typical of the Mexican Border country, picturesque and comfortable. The out-buildings followed out the architecture. There was a huge patio at the back of the ranchhouse, enclosed in a thick, adobe wall, and over it all hung the limbs of huge sycamores, shading it at any time of the day.

A horse wrangler took charge of the team. Harbin and Silver went up to the house and a woman met them on the long porch. She wasn't very old, and she was very pretty. Harbin introduced her as Mrs. Harbin. He went into the house, leaving them together.

"So you are going to be Jimmy French," said Mrs. Harbin softly.

"Yes'm," replied Silver.

"Well, it might be wonderful," she

Silver went backward over the edge of the grade and crashed down into a manzanita tangle

said. "I don't know. It seems a shame to trick him in that way, but Cal feels that it might bring him a little happiness. He asks for Jimmy all the time. Maybe that is half of his trouble—not seeing his son."

Silver was puzzled. This was another angle to the deal. She said, "It is very nice of you to do this for him—a stranger. Still, we couldn't use anyone he knows. Maybe it will be all right."

IT SUDDENLY struck Silver that this woman didn't know what the real scheme was. She thought he was doing this to ease the mind of a sick man.

"Of course it would be different if he could see. You don't look like Jimmy French," she said.

"Did you know him well, ma'am?" asked Silver.

She looked away for a moment, but turned back to him.

"I was going to marry him," she said simply.

"I'm awful sorry, ma'am."

"But that was a long time ago," she said wearily. "Ages and ages ago."

"But yuh still remember," he said gently.

"Yes, I remember. There are things we never forget."

"Yuh don't know where he went?"

"Nobody knows. They said he killed a man. But he got away from the sheriff, who was taking him to a train—and nobody knows what became of him. After that his father sold out and came here. He made Cal foreman of the Rafter F, and we came along."

"It's pretty out here," he said. "I like it."

She brushed a lock of hair away from her eyes and nodded wearily. "Yes, it is pretty," she said. "I have to go now. Good luck."

Cal Harbin came to the doorway a few minutes later and motioned to Silver.

"I think he understands," he said. "I'll go in with yuh."

"No," said Silver quietly. "After all, if I was his own son, who had been away for ten years, do you think I'd want you with me, when I see him? This is somethin' I'll handle for myself."

"Well, all right," said Harbin grudgingly. "Go ahead."

Harbin went to the bedroom door with Silver, but came back to the porch. Nora French came around the corner of the house, carrying some roses. She looked questioningly at Harbin, who jerked a thumb toward the doorway. Then he came down the steps to her.

"I saw him with you," she said. "He came on the same stage with me last night."

"Did, eh?" grunted Harbin. "You didn't tell me."

"I didn't know he was the man, but I knew who he was."

Harbin stared at her for several moments. "You knew who he was?" he asked. "You mean—"

"Yes, I knew him in Montana. And I'm sure he knows me."

"He knew you—on the stage? He didn't speak?"

"He wouldn't. He isn't that kind, Cal."

"Well," he said grimly, "this is interestin'. Who is he?"

"Silver Malone."

"I know his name, but I don't know what he is."

"All I know is what I've heard, Cal—that he is the coldest-blooded gunman in the Northwest. They say his nerves are all frozen. He don't care for women, and he throws his money away. I can guarantee the last two faults."

"It kinda looks like Bond had picked a tiger," said Harbin grimly. "Well, maybe he's the best kind, after all."

"He knows I'm not Nora French."

"What's the difference? Let him know it. I don't believe the old man will live a week."

"You think he'll believe that this man is his son, Cal?"

Cal Harbin shrugged his shoulders. "*Quien sabe?* I told him that Jimmy is back. He didn't say anything. I asked him if he wanted me to bring him in, and he just nodded."

"I better not be here when he comes out," said the girl, and went back toward the patio gate, carrying her roses.

Cal Harbin sat down on the steps and rolled a cigarette. Everything depended on Tom French accepting this man as his son. Cal didn't trust Parker Bond too far, but they had to get along, because they had too much on each other.

Silver Malone was in there a long time; so long that Cal Harbin became nervous. He was pacing along the big porch, when Silver came out. The tall, scar-faced man didn't say anything for

quite a while, as he leaned against the porch railing and stared off at the distant hills, indistinct in the heat-haze.

"Well?" said Harbin curiously, anxiously, too.

"He's sleepin'," said Silver.

"Sleepin', eh? But what happened?"

"Harbin," replied Silver quietly, "I've known a lot of bad people in my life, detestable folks, who would stoop to anythin'. In the last ten minutes I've picked out the worst of the lot—and that one is me. I'm a foot lower than a sleepin' skunk."

Harbin laughed shortly. "So he fell for yuh, eh?"

"I reckon that's what yuh'd call it, Harbin."

Silver flexed his sinewy, right hand, staring down at it.

"He took my hand, Harbin. He said, 'I've waited for yuh, Jimmy. You take charge of the Rafter F. It's good to have yuh back, son.'"

"Take charge of the Rafter F?" parroted Harbin, and laughed. "I run this place, Malone—and don't get any queer ideas."

Silver Malone said nothing. He didn't seem to have heard what Harbin said. A bright-colored humming-bird buzzed in close to Silver Malone's face, backed up and lit on the rail beside a climbing rose.

"Pretty little devil," said Silver quietly. He looked at Harbin.

"It'll be good to ride the hills again," he said.

Harbin snorted angrily. "You heard what I said, didn't yuh?" he asked. "I'm boss of the Rafter F."

"We'll make a count of the cows," said Silver. "I want to know what I've got—to start out right."

Silver looked at Harbin as he spoke, and their eyes clashed, but it was Harbin, who looked away.

"I reckon I'll go in and have a talk with Bond," he said, and walked down the steps, heading for the big stable.

SILVER sat there and watched Cal Harbin ride away. It brought a glint of amusement into Silver's eyes, and he said to himself, "He's goin' to tell the teacher on me, I reckon."

Silver sauntered around the house and through the big patio gate. It was cool in there, heavily shaded, and the floor was of irregular red tiles, mined somewhere in the hills around the Broken Arrow range, and hauled to the ranch.

Nora was sitting on a crude bench in the shade, working on a piece of embroidery. Silver walked over and stopped near her. She looked up at him, but did not speak. He said, "Kinda pretty."

She put the work aside on the bench and looked at him. Nora had pretty eyes, but they were hard now, and her voice was sarcastic as she said quietly, "So you are Jimmy French."

"A cousin of yores," he said slowly, his face serious. "It's kinda funny, gettin' relatives like this. I guess yuh never know yore luck."

Attention, Tuttle Fans! LAW-STAR FOR AN OUTLAW, a long novelet by W. C. Tuttle, is in the 196-Page Fall issue of GIANT WESTERN—25c Per Copy!

"Luck?"

"Yeah, luck. You know, yuh could be ugly."

"Then you don't think I'm ugly?"

"Not on the outside."

"That is rather a back-handed compliment, Silver Malone."

"If I were you, I wouldn't forget that the name is Jimmy French."

"Sorry. I guess you recognized me yesterday on the stage."

"Uh-huh."

"It was nice of you to not show it."

"I didn't know you was my cousin, and I wasn't goin' to spoil anythin' for you, down here."

"Spoil anything? What do you mean?"

Silver looked at her thoughfully for several moments.

"Yuh see," he said quietly, "I don't know anythin' about you. All I know is that yuh worked in a honky-tonk. It wasn't a very nice place, and you wasn't associatin' with very good people. I had a hunch that mebbe you was married to some cowman down here, and I wasn't goin' to, well, I wasn't goin' to recognize yuh."

"Nice of you, Silver."

"I wasn't tryin' to be nice. Yore business is yore own. Yuh see, our crooked lawyer friend told me there was a Nora French, but that's all. It kinda complicated things, me seein' you. Yuh see,

you could swear that I'm Silver Malone. But with you in on this dirty scheme, I reckon we're drawin' cards in the same game."

"Evidently," said Nora, "you don't like the scheme."

"Do you?" he countered.

"I don't care for the scheme, but I do like the money."

Silver sat down on the end of the bench, his elbows on his knees. "Bond is payin' yuh well, eh?" he asked.

"That," she replied firmly, "is entirely a personal matter."

"My mistake," he said quietly. "But I don't quite figure this deal out. Bond told me that he brought you here to impersonate the old man's niece, figurin' he'd change his will in yore favor. Then he tells me that the old man won't do it; so he has to get a man to play the son. Why does he keep you here?"

"I'm his ace-in-the-hole," smiled Nora. "Bond is no fool. He's taking the easy way now, but if Tom French wouldn't accept you as his son, Bond says he can dig up proof that Jimmy French is dead, and—well, I'm the only living relative. I'd get the Rafter F."

Silver Malone scowled thoughtfuly.

"If I were in your place, Silver Malone," Nora said quietly. "I'd play the game on the square with Parker Bond."

"On the square?" he queried.

"That's right. Accidents do happen, you know. Now, if you will excuse me, I'll go in and see if my uncle needs anything."

"Wait a minute," said Silver sharply. Nora came back to him.

"Harbin's wife—does she know what's goin' on?" he asked.

"Her?" Nora laughed. "Of course not. She's just plain dumb. Didn't Bond tell you that?"

"No. Who else don't know?"

"The four cowboys. You don't think that Bond would broadcast it, do you? He don't want anybody to know who you are, until it's all set. Think over what I said—about playing square."

Nora went into the house, and Silver wandered down to the stable. There were two good-looking horses in the stable, and several good saddles. Ten minutes later Silver Malone rode away from the Rafter F, heading for Sunset Wells. He wanted to get the feel of a good horse between his knees, and think things over alone.

CHAPTER III

Silver Takes the Reins

HARBIN had finished his talk with Bond before Silver reached town, and had gone when Silver came down from changing his clothes at the hotel. He was wearing close-fitting overalls, a black shirt, white muffler and a stringy-vest. Around his lean waist was a hand-made gunbelt, and his black-handled Colt .45 swung in a short holster. The butt of that black gun swayed out, as though seeking a chance to fill the sinewy-hand that brushed near it. He went straight over to Bond's office, and found the lawyer alone. Bond didn't seem too happy.

"Harbin told me you fooled the old man completely," the lawyer began.

"Yeah, I reckon so," nodded Silver. "It wasn't so hard."

Bond drew a deep breath. "Harbin is concerned over a remark you made, Malone," he said. "About you taking charge of the Rafter F."

"Tom French asked me to," said Silver, seemingly not concerned over Harbin's anxiety. Bond laughed shortly.

"Don't pay any attention to what Tom French says, Malone. He isn't responsible for what he says."

"I know what yuh mean," remarked Silver, "but wouldn't it be the reasonable thing to do? Wouldn't folks expect me to take it over?"

"Harbin runs the Rafter F, Malone."

"I'd like to remind yuh, Bond," said Silver coldly, "that Tom French isn't dead yet."

"Wait a minute!" snapped the lawyer. "Are you trying to make trouble? We hired you to do a certain job. All right, you go ahead and do that job, but keep your hands off the Rafter F."

Silver Malone's lips smiled a little, but his eyes were hard, as he looked down at the desk-top at his thigh. There was an envelope, opened, plainly addressed to Tom French, Rafter F ranch, Sunset Wells, Arizona, and the postmark showed that it had been stamped that day. It flashed through Silver's

mind that Harbin had got the ranch mail and left the letter with Bond.

Bond reached over, picked up the envelope and shoved it into a drawer of his desk. Silver Malone looked intently at the lawyer for several moments.

Then he said quietly, "Keep on bein' as crooked as yuh like, Bond, but just remember this—smart crooks don't monkey with Uncle Sam's mail."

Bond was confused and angry for the moment, but quickly gained control of his nerves.

"I happen to be attorney for Tom French—and he is in no shape, mentally, to handle his own correspondence."

Silver Malone laughed in Bond's face.

"Just suppose I don't mind my own business?" he asked. "I can queer yore deal just like that!" Silver Malone snapped his fingers. "Now wait a minute, Bond! You can't threaten to turn me over to the authorities of New Mexico, because they'd know I'm not the man they convicted. And if I exposed you—you'd be a fine one to try and convince the law of anythin'.

"Wait just a moment! I'm not sayin' that I'd do anythin' of the kind, but I'm no hired dog. I don't have to do yore dirty work. From now on, Bond, don't threaten me—'cause I don't scare worth a cent."

Bond's face was apoplectic. He clenched and unclenched his pudgy fists impotently. Finally he managed to say, "Blast you, Malone, I've told people that—that you are Jimmy French! Wait!"

Bond turned and fumbled with the combination of his little safe, which he was finally able to open. He took out a roll of currency and shoved some of it across the desk.

"There's five hundred dollars for your trouble, Malone," he said huskily. "Now get out! Get out of Sunset Wells! I don't want to ever see you again. Well?" He stared at the thin smile on Silver Malone's lips.

"Five hundred," said Silver Malone. "Bond, you're a cheap skunk, and I've got a good notion to shove this money down yore dirty throat."

He flung the money on the desk and walked over to the door.

"What are you going to do?" whispered the lawyer.

"What do yuh think I'm goin' to do?" retorted Silver.

"You'll never get a cent from me, Malone!"

"I won't need it, Bond—I'm takin' over the Rafter F."

SILVER MALONE went back to his horse, realizing that he had made an enemy of the man who was to pay him ten thousand dollars. Not only would he never get that money, but he might find the Broken Arrow range a very dangerous place for him, indeed. But Silver Malone wasn't doing any great amount of worrying. He was used to dangerous living.

He stabled his horse at the ranch, and met Old Doughgod Adams, the ranch cook, who was sitting on the back steps, cooling off after baking bread. The old rawhider eyed Silver closely, as the tall cowboy came up to him.

"I'm Doughgod Adams," he said, getting to his feet. "Been cookin' for Tom French ten year. Yuh're Jimmy French, eh?"

Silver smiled. "Glad to meet yuh, Doughgod."

"Glad yuh showed up," said the cook soberly. "Dog-my-cats, I ain't never seen such a change in a man! I took some grub in to Tom a while ago—and he et it! Actually did. And he ain't done that for a month. Every day I fix him up somethin' that he likes, and he don't want it. But he did t'day."

Doughgod shook his head. "Beats me," he said. "You shore perked him up a heap. Betcha four-bits, even money, that he's out of bed in two-three days."

"I hope so," said Silver. "Doughgod, there ain't nobody who can read men like a ranch cook. What sort of a person is Cal Harbin?"

"Hard," replied the cook. "Good man with cows—but hard. Mebbe they're the best kind. Cowpokes are hard to handle, yuh know."

"I'm takin' over here, Doughgod."

"Yuh mean—yuh're ramroddin' the Rafter F?"

"That's right."

The old cook squinted against the light and shaded his eyes with his left hand. "Well, why not?" he said slowly. "After all, yuh're his son. I—I jist wonder what Cal Harbin will do—him and his woman."

"She seems nice," said Silver absently.

"She doggone well is nice!" blurted

Doughgod. "Nobody ain't never known a finer woman than Marion Harbin."

Doughgod thought it over for a while, before he said quietly, "Jist between me and you, I don't think she's awful happy."

"Yuh mean with Harbin?"

"Well, yeah. He don't never take her anywhere. I see things. It ain't none of my business, of course, but I figure a feller who is married to as nice a woman as her hadn't ought to fool around other women. Mebbe I'm wrong. I dunno."

"We can't doctor up other people's morals, Doughgod."

"No, I know we can't. We've got a job takin' care of our own. But I can't quite compare Nora French with Marion Harbin. I know which one I'd take."

"So that's the way the wind blows, eh?" murmured Silver.

"I didn't say that, I jist compared 'em."

"Thanks, Doughgod. See yuh later. I'll be here for supper."

Silver Malone wandered around the patio. Here was an adobe cottage where Cal Harbin and his wife lived. It was a neat, little place, with roses and ivy along the wall. Mrs. Harbin was pinning some roses back against a trellis, when Silver came up to her.

She smiled and fastened the last twig.

"You have done a wonderful thing," she said. "Tom French is so much better. I saw him a while ago, and he talked to me."

"That's fine," said Silver.

Mrs. Harbin drew a deep breath, looked back at the roses, but turned back to Silver.

"I—I wanted to tell you something," she said. "I don't know why I want to tell you, but—"

She hesitated and Silver said, "I'm an awful good listener, Ma'am."

"It's about Nora French," she said quietly. "I haven't mentioned it to anyone around here, but it bothers me. You see, I am from New Mexico, and I saw Nora French about a dozen years ago. I have a pretty good memory, and I feel sure that this woman is not Nora French."

Silver smiled to himself, "That's queer," he said. "Are you sure?"

"Just so sure that two weeks ago I sent a letter to Nora French, addressing it to the town where she used to live. I also wrote to a woman I knew well, who knew Nora French, asking about her. I haven't heard from either of them yet."

"But," said Silver, "if this woman ain't Nora French, what is she doin' here, usin' that name?"

Mrs. Harbin's lips closed tightly for several moments.

"I don't know," she said. "I'm afraid to say what I think. Don't say anything, please. I must start supper now."

Silver smiled grimly to himself as he went back to the house.

HARBIN and his wife didn't eat at the ranchhouse, nor did Nora French. She took her meals in her room, much to the disgust of Doughgod Adams. Doughgod introduced Silver to the four cowboys, Len Allen, Jake Collins, Andy Head and "Dude" Olivera. They were all rough, tough cowpokes, not inclined to take a stranger to their bosom, but they accepted Silver Malone as one of their own kind.

Judging from their conversation, Dude Olivera was rather smitten with Nora French, but had no chance against the wiles of one Slim Carson. Silver remembered Bond telling him that Slim was the foreman of the Diamond B, Bond's spread.

"How can yuh tell she's solid with Slim?" Doughgod said. "Mebbe she'll like Dude better, when he quits shavin' with a dull razor. Ain't nobody ownin' that little filly, until they got her hog-tied by a sky pilot. And," added the cook with finality, "I wouldn't be too danged sure then."

"Wisdom from a dough-puncher," laughed Andy Head.

"It's good, too, Andy," assured Doughgod. "I got that from pers'nal experience."

When the meal was finished Silver said, "Boy's from now on, you're takin' orders from me."

None of them said anything for a while, but finally Andy responded, "Well, why not? That's what you're here for, ain't it?"

The other three cowboys nodded in agreement.

"On Monday," said Silver, "we start a count. I'd like to know what's on this spread."

"You should," nodded Andy, who seemed to lead the boys.

They got up from the table, and Andy followed Silver out onto the big front

porch. "I don't like to say this," he said quietly, "but me and the boys have a feelin' that the Rafter F is bein' robbed."

"What do yuh base that on, Andy?" asked Silver.

"You know how it is," replied Andy. "Ridin' all the time, we notice things. Oh, mebbe some calves, yearlin's with a bunch of cows, hangin' around a certain waterhole. You git so yuh notice markin's, color—you know. Then they kinda fade out—don't see 'em any more. Mebbe I'm wrong. I dunno."

"I see," said Silver thoughtfully. "You've told Harbin?"

"Yeah, he knows. He's gone with us, checkin' up, but we ain't never found anythin' for shore. I just wanted yuh to know. We ain't made a count in over a year."

"We'll count, Andy," Silver answered. "The old man must have records to show what the last count was, and what's been sold."

"Yeah, I reckon he has, him or Harbin. You sleepin' in the house?"

"Not if there's an extra bunk in the bunkhouse."

"There's two. Take yore pick, and we'd like to have yuh."

"I appreciate that, Andy."

Doughgod Adams came out to them and told Silver, "The old man wants t' see yuh. I think Harbin's been talkin' to him."

Andy joined the other three cowboys at the bunkhouse. Jake Collins said, "What do yuh think of the new boss, Andy?"

"Suits me," replied Andy shortly in his crisp voice.

"Suits me, too," said Jake. "Salty, but sensible. But I wonder how Cal will take it. He's been the stud-buzzard a long time, and he acts like the spread belongs to him. Do yuh think there'll be trouble, Andy?"

Andy said. "'Fraid so. Harbin's been talkin' to the old man, and the old man sent for Jim French. Mebbe he's changed his mind. Harbin allus did influence the old man."

Silver came back to the bunkhouse, where the boys were playing poker, and told them that Cal Harbin would continue as foreman.

"But what about you?" asked Andy.

"I'll give Harbin his orders," smiled Silver. The boys grinned.

"What do we call you—Mr. French, Jimmy—or what?" Andy asked. "We don't want no mistakes."

Silver smiled slowly. "Just call me Silver," he said. "I answer to that a lot better than any other."

"I don't want to be nosy," said Len Allen, "but how'd yuh get that nickname?"

"From a bad train wreck, Len. When the doctors got through with me they said I had more silver in my head than I had brains."

"Kinda busted yuh up, eh?"

Silver nodded and went over to his bunk, elated to know that Andy had unwittingly given him the chance to establish his own nickname. As for Harbin remaining as foreman, Silver understood. Tom French had haltingly explained the situation. Mrs. Harbin had been good to him. Harbin had no other job in sight, and Tom French had said that he would like to keep Harbin, at least for a while, but that Harbin would take orders from Silver.

Silver had asked Tom French for some figures on the number of cows on the

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... ITS QUALITY
HITS THE SPOT !

Rafter F, but the old man was vague on the matter. He said to ask Harbin, who had handled everything. Silver did not mention what the boys had said about stolen cattle. No use worrying a sick man over things like that. He'd ask Harbin for the figures, but under the circumstances, he would expect Harbin to lie.

THE next morning, before breakfast, Andy Head came to Silver.

"I don't want you to think I'm buttin' in on yore business," he told Silver, "but I jist wanted to tell yuh that Harbin is fast with a gun, and he's never been whipped with fists. He thinks he's a little tin whistle on wheels, when it come to a battle.

"Thank you, Andy," said Silver. "I don't know of any reason why I should have trouble with Harbin. Of course, if he feels that a fight will settle the issue, I'll remember what yuh said."

"Yuh're welcome, Silver. Don't get the idea that we're against Cal Harbin. We've all worked for him quite a while, but we like Tom French, and we all like Mrs. Harbin. Mebbe you can tear that apart and see what I mean."

"Yeah, I reckon I can."

The boys were saddling their horses at the corral, and Silver was standing in the stable doorway when Cal Harbin came down from his quarters. He hadn't come in from Sunset Wells until the late hours of the morning, and his eyes showed the effect of whisky. But he was not drunk. He merely glanced at the boys, as he came up to Silver, who stepped out to meet him.

Neither of them spoke. Cal Harbin was as tall as Silver, but at least twenty pounds heavier. The boys were too far away to hear quiet conversation, and were minding their own business.

"What have you got on yore mind, you doublecrossin' pup?" Harbin began. Silver Malone's face was a poker-mask as he replied evenly, "I want facts and figures on how many head of stock were in the last count of the Rafter F, Harbin. We're startin' a new count on Monday, and I want somethin' to check against."

"Well, ain't that wonderful?" sneered Harbin. "You want it. And just how do you expect to get it, Malone?"

"I expect you to give it to me, Harbin."

Harbin laughed nastily. "If yuh're wise," he said, "yuh'll shake a hoof off the Broken Arrow range. We're all through with you."

The four boys, realizing that everything was not just right, had stopped work and grouped against the corral fence, watching.

Silver Malone laughed, but his eyes were hard.

"I'd like those figures now, Harbin," Malone said.

Harbin was blazing mad, but not incautious. His eyes shifted to Silver Malone's gun, to that big hand, fingers partly splayed, and he remembered what Nora had said about Silver being a cold-blooded gunman.

"No use throwin' lead in this deal, Harbin," said Silver, as though reading Harbin's mind. "Better be a good boy and deliver the papers."

"Yuh're leavin' this country," said Harbin evenly, "but I'm goin' to put my mark on yuh, before you leave."

"Put yore mark?" queried Silver.

"Jist addin' to the ones you've already got, prob'ly for not mindin' yore own business. If you ain't as yaller as I think you are, take off that gunbelt, Malone."

The four cowboys were moving along the fence, watching them.

"Yours first, Harbin," said Silver calmly. "I never trust a rattler, as long as he's got fangs."

Muttering a curse Harbin unbuckled his belt and flung it aside into the dirt. Silver unfastened his, rolled the belt around the holster and handed it to Andy Head.

"I never mistreat my gun," he said. "It's been a good friend."

Harbin was hunched forward, opening and closing his big hands, a vicious scowl on his face. Silver noticed that Mrs. Harbin and Nora French were on the front porch, apparently watching.

"If yuh're ready, Harbin, cut yore wolf loose," said Silver, indifferently.

"Don't let him butt yuh," said one of the boys. Harbin's eyes shifted toward them, but snapped back to Silver, who stood there, arms dangling at his sides. He had placed his hat on top of a corral post.

Harbin inched forward, his guard up, right hand cocked. Silver Malone, balanced easily on his feet, smiled grimly, as Harbin made futile motions with his

clenched left hand. Suddenly the foreman rushed ahead, driving his right hand for Silver's jaw, but the jaw was not there, because Silver had swayed aside, taken one short step, and Harbin had gone completely past him.

Harbin whirled quickly. Silver had not put up his hands yet, it was the first time that Harbin had ever failed to land that first punch. He took a deep, whistling breath, and dived at Silver, both hands flailing.

This time he crashed into the stable wall, and almost went to his knees. Silver had merely faded aside. Harbin was cursing bitterly. The four cowboys were showing amazed mirth, and Harbin directed some of his profanity at them.

"Why don't yuh stand up and fight?" he panted. "Why, you—"

"You're doin' the fightin'," said Silver calmly. "Keep goin'."

Harbin's left eyebrow had been badly scraped against the rough board of the stable wall, and it annoyed him. He rubbed the back of his hand across the eyebrow, scowling at Silver. Suddenly Harbin leaped ahead, both hands extended and clutched at Silver, but Silver knew the technique of a dirty fighter.

Harbin intended to grab Silver's shoulders, jerk him forward, and at the same time, duck his own head. He intended to butt Silver in the face with the top of his head, a rather murderous maneuver when carried out successfully. But this one didn't work.

Silver stepped back quickly, and brought his right fist around in a flashing, looping hook, which caught Harbin under the chin. For a moment Harbin stood perfectly still, both arms extended, fingers splayed, head down. Then he pitched forward on his face in the dirt.

There were a few moments of complete silence.

Then Andy said, "Prettiest thing I ever seen."

Silver leaned against the stable wall. Mrs. Harbin had started off the porch, but went back. Nora French was leaning against the porch-railing, shading her eyes with one hand. The four cowboys stood there, staring at Cal Harbin, who had not moved.

"He's cold enough to skate on," said Jake Collins.

CAL HARBIN began moving his feet, and finally tried to get up. No one offered to help him. He managed to sit up, but his eyes were still glazed, and he panted weakly. Gradually he began to understand what had happened. He stared at Silver Malone, and then at the four cowboys. Blood was running down his left cheek from the scrape over his eye, and he spat blood into the dust, as he got to his feet.

He was unsteady on his feet for several moments. Then he turned and went toward his own cottage, paying no attention to anyone. Silver picked up Harbin's belt and gun, and hung them on the corral fence. The gun was full of dust.

"Any orders, Silver?" asked Andy Head soberly.

Silver shook his head. "Take the day off," he said. "Tomorrer is Sunday, and two days rest will do yuh good. We start the count Monday."

"I told yuh he'd try to butt yuh," Andy said. "Man, you shore know how to cure a goat!"

"I'm sorry it happened, Andy," said Silver quietly. "It don't settle anythin'."

Mrs. Harbin had gone, but Nora was still on the porch, as Silver came up there.

He sat down on the steps.

"What a fool you turned out to be, Silver Malone!" Nora said.

"What a fool Cal Harbin turned out to be, too," he replied.

"Don't you realize that you can't win?" she asked. "You'll never get a cent, and you might get a bullet."

"Why don't you go away from here?" he asked seriously. "You don't want Cal Harbin. It's just yore crooked nature, tryin' to make trouble between Cal and his wife."

"You scar-faced bum!" She got to her feet. "Trying to preach to me, are you? Who are you? Silver Malone, gunman, horsethief, maybe worse. And you criticize me!"

He shook his head reprovingly. "You ain't pretty when you're mad," he said. "Yore kind don't like the truth, my dear lady. But if I was you, I'd pull out and leave Cal Harbin to his wife. God knows, he ain't fit for her, but mebbe she loves him."

"For your own information," she said icily, "she does not."

"Sensible woman. But he's still her husband."

A rider turned in at the main gate and rode up to the porch. He was tall and slender, rather good looking. He swung down and came over to the porch. Nora was obliged to introduce Silver. She said, "Silver, this is Slim Carson. Slim, you have heard of Jimmy French, I suppose."

"Yea-a-ah," whispered Slim. "Glad to meetcha, French."

Silver excused himself and went to the bunkhouse, where the boys were getting ready to ride to Sunset Wells.

"I believe I'll ride in with yuh," he told them. "Nothin' to do around here today."

"Wasn't that Slim Carson, who just rode in?" asked Olivera.

Silver nodded. "He seems like a good boy."

"Slim's all right, I reckon," said Andy. "The only thing I've got against him is the fact that he works for Parker Bond."

"You don't seem to like Parker Bond, Andy."

"Who does?" asked Andy.

Doughgod Adams came hurrying in. The old cook had on a clean shirt, new pants and had his boots shined.

"Tomorrer is Sunday, Doughgod," reminded Andy soberly.

"This is m' holiday," grinned Doughgod. "I fixed it up with Mrs. Harbin to take care of supper. Prob'ly only be Nora. I'm itchin' to celebrate."

"Birthday?" asked Jake.

"Nope. I want to celebrate the advent of a fighter that's got brains enough to step back and uppercut a butter. When I seen Cal Harbin bite the dust, I says to me, I says, 'Doughgod, this here is one event that yuh got to observe.' I marked her on the calendar, too, like Christmas, Fourth of July and, well, some of the others."

"You ain't goin' to get drunk, are yuh, Doughgod?" asked Len Allen.

"I am," replied Doughgod, "and nobody hates it worse'n I do."

NEXT ISSUE

THE DISTANT DRUMS

By

WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

AN EXCITING NOVELET

CHAPTER IV

Doughgod Stops a Bullet

TUG HAVERTY, the sheriff, stood in the doorway of his little office in Sunset Wells, scowling out at the street. It was hot and dusty. Tug was a tall, rawboned person, with high cheekbones, buck-teeth and a cowlick. Perspiration glistened on his long nose and he cursed the heat.

Hunched on a chair was "Dobie" Wall, the deputy, trying to put a new string on his mandolin. Dobie was short, fat, partly bald, and habitually out of breath. His fingers were big, clumsy, and that blasted string kept getting away from him and coiling up.

"I told yuh ten years ago that it gets hot here," he reminded "Tug." "Bein' hot is a state of mind, don'tcha know it, Tug? Look at me. I set here and imagine I'm a-settin' on a cake of ice. Yuh'd be s'prised how cold I git. Fact.

"Why, one time I'm down in Death Valley, livin' in a shack with a tin roof. The thermometer only went up as high as a hundred and fifty in the shade; so I don't rightly know how hot it got. Anyway, I says to m'self, 'Dobie, yuh're a Eskimo, settin' in a igloo, and she's sixty below, with a high wind blowin'.'"

"What happened?" asked the sheriff soberly.

"Happened? Huh! Tug, I wish them fellers that make mandolins would make 'em for half-inch-thick strings. These dinky, little ol' wires are too small for a man to thread. Oh, yeah, yuh asked me what happened, didn't yuh?"

"Yeah—what happened?"

"Froze both m' feet, and was in a hospital for six weeks with pneumony, from cold and exposure."

"You better get off that hunk of ice, before yuh get yore pants wet."

"I cain't," replied Dobie seriously. "I'm froze to the blamed thing!"

"Sometimes," remarked the sheriff dismally, "I think yuh're as crazy as a bedbug, Dobie."

"Sometimes," said Dobie, biting on

the end of the string, "I think we're both crazy. There's places where cool winds blow, and people have to build fires to keep warm. But me and you ain't got sense enough to pull out of here and find one of them places. We jist set here and char. Nothin' ever happens. Nobody steals cows, horses, nor robs banks. Nobody shoots at anybody else. Why have a sheriff? Mebbe it's jist heredity."

"Could you do anythin' else that'd pay yuh a hundred a month, Dobie?"

"Well, mebbe not, Tug. But what's the use of gettin' rich? Yuh're just a cinder by the time yuh do—all burned out. I wonder howcome the bunch from the Rafter F are takin' a day off?"

"Andy Head said that the new boss gave 'em a day off. Doughgod Adams is gettin' as drunk as a sheepherder. Says he's celebratin' a great victory."

"Prob'ly the Battle of Bunker Hill," said Dobie. "He goes almost that far back. What do yuh think of Tom French's son, Tug?"

"Well, I dunno," said the sheriff, turning from the doorway. "I talked with Andy about him, and do you know what Andy said?"

"Not havin' heard, I'd be guessin', Tug."

"He said that Cal Harbin jumped him this mornin', took a few swings at the new boss, missed him a mile and then tried to butt him. Know what happened?"

"I've seen what happened to one or two of Cal's victims. What did happen?"

"He knocked Cal out with one punch, and Cal was cold for five minutes."

"No-o-o-o-!" gasped Dobie. "That ain't—you ain't jokin'?"

"Not unless Andy lied, and he don't lie."

Dobie stared at the sheriff. "One punch, Tug? Jist one little punch?"

"No, I reckon it was pretty big."

"Well, I'll be a ant's ancestor! Sa-a-ay! Huh! Well, I reckon, he done her. First time anybody ever knocked that big hombre out."

"Andy said Cal picked the fight, and they shucked their guns. It was all on the square, too."

"Well," remarked Dobie, "I'll say this much; when Tom French raised that boy, he didn't raise in vain. I'd like to meet him—peaceful-like."

HAVERTY went slowly back to the doorway. At least, there was a semblance of air out there. Old Doughgod Adams was crossing the street from the Saguaro Saloon, going toward the general store, where he met Parker Bond. They stopped, and it seemed that an argument took place.

The sheriff was unable to hear what was said, but Doughgod took a right-hand swing at the lawyer, missed him by at least five feet, and sat down flat on the wooden sidewalk. Parker Bond went across the street, not even looking back at Doughgod, who got to his feet, stared back at the retreating lawyer, and then came down the street toward the sheriff's office.

"Hyah, Doughgod," Tug said. "How's everythin'?"

"Finern' frawg-hair," replied Doughgod. "Say!" He put one hand against the wall for assistance, and blinked thoughtfully.

"Somethin' I can do for yuh?" asked the sheriff.

"Yeah. I want a warrant f'r the arresht of Parker Bond."

"Is that so? What's he done to yuh, Doughgod?"

"He libeled me, Tuggie! Ab'sho-lutely. Crim'nal libel. Said I was a dir'y, ol' skunk. That's libel—or worsh. Didja shee me hit'm? Man, I shore knocked him one. I'll be'cha he'll be bowlegged the resht of his mis'able life."

"Yeah, I saw that punch, Doughgod. After all, yuh're even with him. He libeled yuh, and you punched him. Call it even. If he wants a warrant for you punchin' him, I won't give him one."

"Yore the bes' friend I've got, Tuggie. I love you, abs'lutely. Voted for yuh, didn't I? Bes' sheriff we ever had."

"Don't hit the lawyer any more, Doughgod," advised the sheriff. "That one punch was plenty. You paid him back for what he said."

"Tha's right. Man, I shore rattled his molars. Us Rafter F's are all fighters. I'll buy yuh a drink, Tuggie."

"No, thanks, Doughgod. It's too hot to drink now."

"Yuh're welcome, my frien'. Any ol' time. Well, I mus' go back and re-coo-per-ate. Nice to have sheen yuh, Tuggie."

And Doughgod went his erratic way up the street.

Dobie said, "All fixed—at last. Tug,

would yuh like to hear me play 'Sweet Marie'?"

Tug sighed deeply and shook his head. "A hundred and thirty in the shade—and you ask me that! Blast it—no! I've got a good notion to crawl under the house—like the dogs do."

"There's a hole under the back of the place, but yuh'll have to enlarge it a little, Tug. Make it big enough, and I'll join yuh. . . ."

Cal Harbin came to Sunset Wells later that afternoon. From a window in the Saguaro Saloon, Silver saw him meet Parker Bond at the post office, where they talked for a long time. After their conversation Cal Harbin got on his horse and went back home. Silver was sure that the conversation was about him, and he wondered what they were planning.

Silver and the boys, with the exception of Doughgod, ate supper at a little restaurant, where Andy introduced Silver to Tug Haverty and Dobie Wall.

"I'm shore glad to hear yore pa is gettin' along so good," Dobie told him. "I saw Doc Wayland, and he said he ain't never seen such improvement in anybody."

"Thank yuh," said Silver. "He's doin' all right. Is Doc Wayland pretty good?"

"He's fine," said the sheriff. "Honest as a dollar."

"Good on horses, too," said Dobie. "If you've got a ringbone, he can shore give yuh relief."

"He's not a horse doctor," said the sheriff.

"Well, horses ain't particular, Tug. One time he vaccinated me for smallpox, and two weeks later he discovered he'd given me a shot for black-leg. He did so, Tug. You ask him. And when Peewee Ripley had pneumony, Doc fed him on Kickapoo Indian Sagwa, and there was three months that Peewee couldn't speak a word of English. Talked Kickapoo all the time."

"He's just a little nearsighted," said Andy.

"Nearsighted?" gasped Dobie. "Why, Doc's so nearsighted that you cain't even see him yoreself at a hundred feet—not to recognize him."

"But he's honest," said the sheriff wearily. "When Dobie starts lyin'—"

"I ain't lyin'," interrupted Dobie. "I can prove every lie I ever uttered. I was christened George Washington Wall."

"How come yore initials are C.M.?" asked Andy.

"Well, sir," replied Dobie, "I'll tell yuh how it was. I was christened in a church in Texas. Me and ma and pa and the preacher was gathered for this here solemn occasion, and jist as the preacher said, 'I hereby christen this wonderful boy— Wham! Lightnin' hit the church. Fact. Set it on fire. Well, sir, the confusion was so great that everybody, except me, forgot what I was supposed to be branded with. Pa grabbed Ma by the hand and said, 'Come on Ma!' That's where we got the C.M. Come on Ma."

"Yore name," said the sheriff," is Cadwallader Montgomery. Yuh was named after a catalog."

"Where'd they git the Cadwallader?" asked Len Allen.

"That," said Dobie, "is one of the mysteries that could only come out of Texas."

THE evening drifted on. Some of the boys got into a poker game, but Silver wasn't interested in poker. It was about nine o'clock that evening, when Doughgod Adams got a sudden idea that Parker Bond had insulted him. The idea grew into firm conviction. Doughgod had purchased a quart of whisky, which he was carrying in his coat pocket, and he decided to go and tell Parker Bond just what he thought of him.

Doughgod managed to find his way through the saloon doorway, and along the sidewalk to the door of Parker Bond's office. The shades were tightly drawn, but there was a lighted lamp on the table, and the door was unlocked. Inside went Doughgod Adams. He was all set to tell Bond a few things about himself—but no Bond. Doughgod sat down and relaxed.

Dude Olivera had gone over to the general store for tobacco, and when he came back to the Saguaro he said to Silver, "I saw Bond, the lawyer, over at the store a while ago, and he said that if I saw yuh to tell yuh he'd like to have yuh drop over to his office for a minute."

"Thank yuh, Dude," said Silver wondering what Bond wanted.

In the meantime, Parker Bond had gone back to his office, where he found Doughgod Adams, trying to open his bottle.

"You get out of here, Adams—and get fast!" he ordered.

"Put me out, yuh legal sidewinder," grinned Doughgod.

BOND clenched his teeth and his pudgy fists.

"You get out!" he snapped. "Get out, before I—"

"Lissen, jughead," said Doughgod. "You ain't goin' t' throw nobody out of no place. I can whip a dozen like you and never git off the size of a sheepskin. Set down and rest yore tonsils."

Parker Bond groaned, swallowed painfully. He didn't know what to do. Footsteps were stopping at his door. It opened and in came Silver Malone. Silver's eyes took in the tableau, and he closed the door behind him.

"You wanted to see me, Bond?" he asked coldly.

"Yes, I— Doughgod, I'd like to—"

"We all have our likes and dislikes," said Doughgod. He got to his feet, the bottle in his hands.

"Excoose me," he said gravely. "Thish mus' be private."

He got to the door, grasped the knob, but turned and said, "How 'bout all of us havin' li'l drink, huh?"

"Not now, Doughgod," said Silver. "See you later."

"Thassall right," said Doughgod owlishly. *"Hasta luego."*

He opened the door and stepped outside, and as he started to close it a gun crashed. It was almost a double explosion. Doughgod yelled painfully, and the door sagged open again.

Silver Malone leaped for the doorway, gun in hand. There was a commotion at the long hitch-rack as a rider whirled his horse from the far end and went racing away. Doughgod was flat on the sidewalk. Men were running out of the saloon as Silver knelt beside the old cook. The men lighted matches, until someone thought to get the lamp off Bond's desk.

Doughgod struggled to a sitting position, blinking at the light. In his right hand was the neck of the quart bottle, and broken glass glistened from his shirt-bosom.

"Who done that?" asked Doughgod. "Who shot me?"

"Where did it hit yuh?" asked Silver.

"I dunno. My gosh, I'm kinda numb all over."

"You've been thataway all afternoon," said Len Allen.

"Here's where the bullet hit!" exclaimed Dobie Wall, pointing at the wall beside the doorway.

"That bullet," said Silver, "hit Doughgod's bottle and glanced off against the wall. Doughgod, you haven't been hit. It was almost like two shots. That corked bottle exploded when the bullet hit it. Get up, Doughgod—you're all right."

"Don' never say that whisky ain't good for yuh," said the old cook, rather unsteady on his feet. "It saved m' life."

"Now," said the sheriff, "what's the story? Who'd shoot Doughgod?"

No one had an answer to that question.

"He was in Bond's office with me and Bond," Silver explained. "He went out, and was shot. I heard a rider pullin' out from the far end of the rack."

"That's a queer deal," remarked the sheriff. "But as long as Doughgod wasn't hurt I don't know what can be done about it."

"I'll buy some life-saver for everybody," invited Doughgod, and headed for the Saguaro.

The rest of the men went, too, except Silver Malone. Bond had taken his lamp back to the office, and was sitting at his desk, shuffling some papers, when Silver Malone came in again. Silver kicked the door shut, and went over to Bond's desk. "What was Doughgod doin' here in yore office Bond?" he asked.

"He was here, when I came in. He wouldn't leave."

"I see." Bond looked up into Silver's slitted eyes, and he didn't like them one little bit.

Silver said, "You told Olivera that yuh wanted to see me, Bond?"

"Yes, I—well, I wanted to talk about—"

"I'll do a little talkin', Bond," interrupted Silver. "You sent for me. Doughgod was here when yuh came. You didn't expect him, did yuh, Bond. No, you only expected me."

"Why, I—I don't know what you mean, Silver. I—"

"You don't know, eh? Yuh're so dumb that you forgot yore scheme to get me killed off, eh?"

"Killed off? Silver, I give you my word—"

"You keep it, Bond. Yore planted gunman was to shoot the first man out of the door—after I went in."

BOND'S face was the color of wood ashes. "No!" he whispered. "No, Silver. You—you couldn't prove it."

"I don't need to prove it, Bond. Things like this never go to a jury. You bungled, my friend. You thought yuh'd get rid of me on the hot end of a bullet. I ought to beat you to death for that, but I won't.

"Tonight, Bond, I'm goin' to write the whole story of yore scheme. I'm goin' to tell everything yuh've told me. Then I'm goin' to tell yore plot to murder me, and if anythin' happens to me here—you're to blame. Then I'm goin' to put that letter where it won't be produced, unless I'm killed. If I am, Bond, that letter will hang you and yore gang. Use yore own judgment. Think it over, my fat friend. Unless I live—you die."

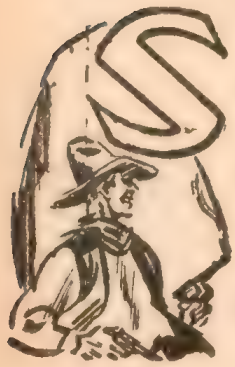
Silver Malone walked over to the door, hesitated and came back.

"If yuh don't mind, I'll use the back door."

Bond looked blankly at him, as he went out.

CHAPTER V

Trouble on the Stage Run



SILVER MALONE went back to the ranch alone. One escape in an evening was enough, and he wasn't sure that Bond's gunman would not come back and make another try. It seemed that Bond was getting panicky. It was nearly morning when the rest of the boys came back, bringing Doughgod with them, too drunk to protest.

Mrs. Harbin cooked the breakfast. Silver was curious about Cal Harbin, and asked her if Cal was in town last night.

"No," she replied, "he wasn't. He was in earlier in the afternoon, but came back and never left the ranch. It was the first Saturday night he hasn't gone to town in months."

Silver smiled. He knew why, too. Harbin wanted an airtight alibi, in case Silver was killed, because of the fact that Silver had knocked him out. The boys were talking about somebody trying to kill Doughgod.

Silver met Nora in the patio a little later in the morning. She was reading a book and didn't pay any attention to him. He sat down a short distance away, partly shielded from the patio gate by some climbing roses. Cal Harbin came to the gate, glanced quickly around and came in.

Nora was startled, but Harbin said, "I wanted to tell yuh what happened, Nora. That—"

"Wait a minute!" she said sharply. "We have company."

Harbin's eyes shifted to Silver Malone, and his eyes hardened.

"Yeah. I see we have," he said quietly. "It can wait."

He turned on his heel and went outside. Nora looked after him, and her hand shook a little, when she picked up her book.

Silver laughed shortly, and she looked at him, her eyes hard.

"I'll tell yuh what happened," said Silver quietly. "Bond made a mistake, and his gunman shot Old Doughgod instead of me."

Nora didn't say anything. Her lips tightened and she drew a deep breath.

"I don't know what you are talking about," she said huskily.

"At least, be honest with me," he said. "We're pardners in crime. We're both liars and crooks. We both came here to try and steal this spread; to steal for an unprincipled lawyer and his dirty gang. We're no good. But yuh're worse than I am, Nora—yuh're tryin' to steal another woman's husband.

"At first it looked like a chance to make a lot of money. But when I found it was a deal against an old man, blind and almost dead; a man who was willin' to accept me as his son, because he was hungry to see his own flesh and blood—well, I—mebbe I've still got a streak of decency in my body."

"Silver, you are a sentimental rat," she said. "At least, you sound sentimental. But you are not fooling anybody. You want to hog the whole thing. Bond don't dare denounce you, because you could ruin his whole scheme."

"Lovely situation," smiled Silver. "Not only that, my dear, but I have outlined the whole crooked scheme, names and all, in a letter. If anything happens to Silver Malone, that letter will tell the law everything. It made interesting writing, and I'm very sure it

would be interesting readin'. I wrote that letter last night, and I'm going to Sunset Wells right away and hand it to a man I can trust. How does it sound to you?"

She didn't say. Silver got to his feet and started for the gate, when Nora said quietly, "It is too bad that Bond made a mistake."

"Isn't it?" he replied. "But that one isn't the only mistake he has made, my dear."

"The biggest one he ever made was when he hired you, Malone."

"You mean the biggest one—so far. Pleasant readin' to you."

As Silver started from the patio to the bunkhouse Harbin called to him. Harbin had a sheet of paper in his hand—the last count of the Rafter F, together with the sales, covering a period of more than a year.

"That's what yuh asked for," said Harbin coldly.

"Much obliged, Harbin."

"You don't need to make a count," said Harbin. "You'll have all that work for nothin'."

"I'll think it over," said Silver, and went on.

IN THE bunkhouse he studied the figures. They showed all the shipments from Gold Butte, dates, number of cars and heads of cattle. There were no figures on costs of shipments, nor destinations. Silver Malone knew that the figures had been doctored. At least, he felt sure that they had. There was only one way to prove it. He went down to the stable, saddled his horse and rode away.

It was late in the afternoon when Silver Malone walked into the little depot at Gold Butte. The telegraph clicker was clattering merrily, and the agent was half asleep in a chair, a faded old mechanic's cap pulled low over his eyes.

He eyed Silver, took his cold pipe out of his mouth and said, "What's your troubles?"

"I'm runnin' the Rafter F, down Sunset Wells way, and I'm after information—if yuh don't mind."

"I'm full of it," said the agent wearily. "What's the question?"

"You keep a record of cattle shipments, don't yuh?"

"Records?"

"For instance," said Silver patiently, "if I shipped five hundred head of beef from here, yuh'd have a record of it, wouldn't yuh?"

"Oh, yeah—shore."

Silver consulted his figures, while the agent dug out an old book from a dusty shelf.

"On May thirtieth," said Silver, "the Rafter F shipped five hundred head."

The agent squinted at his record closely.

"You're wrong," he said, "it was three hundred head."

"Yuh're shore of that?" asked Silver.

"I better be," replied the agent dryly.

"All right. On August second, we shipped two hundred and fifty head."

"That," said the agent, "is pretty interestin'. Must have done it when I was asleep. No record for that date. In fact," he sighed and closed his book, "the Rafter F ain't shipped since May. And like I said, it was three hundred head. Anythin' else?"

"Nothin' more—and thanks a lot."

"We strive t' please," sighed the agent and sat down again.

The stage for Sunset Wells was leav-

[*Turn page*]

Many Never Suspect Cause of Backaches

This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. *(Adv.)*

ing as Silver came down past the Gold Butte stage depot, and Buck Young, recognizing Silver as a former passenger, waved at him. There was a woman on the stage, looking through the dusty side window at Silver as he waved back at Buck.

It was very clear to Silver now that Harbin was helping loot the Rafter F. There was a difference of four hundred and fifty head between the figures Harbin had given him, and the actual number of cattle shipped.

He got his horse and started back to Sunset Wells, riding slowly. He was riding a powerful sorrel gelding. The animal was a bit leg-weary, but Silver Malone was not in any hurry. It was good to ride alone and think. None of his enemies knew he had gone to Gold Butte, or they might ambush him along that lonesome road. Darkness came quickly after sunset, and the heat of the day began to change, as a cooling wind swept the hills.

Millions of stars seemed to dance along the crest of the desert hills, and a moon came peeping over the hills, bathing the world in silver. And the Joshua Palms, the Dancing Jaspers of the desert lands, strung along the skyline seemed, like tortured souls, to lift their gnarled arms to the sky in gratitude for relief from heat.

Somewhere ahead of Silver Malone was the Sunset Wells stage, laboring over the rough road. Silver was only about three miles from Sunset Wells, where the road wound around a canyon, when he thought he heard the echo of a shot.

He spurred quickly ahead, leaving a dust-screen behind him from the galloping hoofs of his sorrel. The road was crooked and narrow, and he was unable to ride very fast. Suddenly, at a sharp righthanded curve, his horse shied aside. He drew up quickly and swung around. There was a woman standing at the edge of the road, half in the shadow of the cliffs.

Silver Malone was out of his saddle quickly, and went over to her. She was crying softly and holding her right arm.

"Yuh're hurt, ma'am?" he asked anxiously.

"Not very bad," she said weakly. "It was terrible. There were shots—and I—I guess the team ran away. I didn't know what to do, and then there was a crash. I guess the door flew open and I was thrown out. I—I really don't know what else happened. Then I was all alone."

"Are yuh shore no bones are broken?" he asked.

"No, I don't believe they are. But what will I do?"

"Well, ma'am, I think that's goin' to be pretty simple. We'll both ride my horse. It ain't far to Sunset Wells, and we'll make it fine. Shucks, you ain't very big. I'll boost yuh up in the saddle first, and—now, don't be scared—I won't let yuh get hurt."

Before she realized what he was doing, he picked her up in his arms and placed her in the saddle. It was all so simple.

"Easy, wasn't it?" he laughed. "Now, I'll get up behind you and—"

Silver's foot was in the stirrup when something seemed to strike the horse a solid blow, and at the same moment a shot blasted the stillness of the night. The horse whirled against Silver, knocking him backwards, and went down in a heap.

SILVER was unable to catch his balance, went backwards off the edge of the grade, and crashed down into the brush, at least a dozen feet below the grade level. A sprawling manzanita broke his fall, but it also hooked around his clothes, making it impossible for him to release himself and crawl out of the tangle of sharp brush at once. He couldn't see what was going on up there, but he heard a man's voice say, "Never mind him—he's prob'ly down in the canyon. You help me."

A few moments later he heard horses walking, a man swearing softly, and then, what sounded like several horses, going away. Silver managed to get loose from the manzanita, and an examination showed that he had been only inches from going into the depths of the canyon. It was a ticklish spot to get out of, but Silver was endowed with all the patience of an Indian. By working toe-holds into the dirt and rocks, and taking advantage of every possible hand-hold afforded by nature, he finally sprawled over the edge.

There was a horse in the shadow on the cliff, and Silver froze in his position. Maybe someone was waiting for him. But where was his dead horse?

He was under the impression that his horse had been killed.

Slowly he got to his feet and went over to the animal in the shadow. It was his sorrel. It nuzzled at him, and he swore quietly. Queer thing. Then he ran a hand along the top of its neck, just below the mane. It was wet there, and that wetness was blood.

Silver Malone laughed. The bullet had struck just over the neck vertebrae, knocking the animal down, paralyzing it for a few moments but not causing any lasting injury. In the parlance of the cattle country, the horse had been "creased."

Silver adjusted the saddle while he gave the animal time to recover. He felt of the wound again, but the horse didn't seem to mind. Then he carefully climbed into the saddle and the horse moved on down the grade as though nothing had ever happened to it.

He wondered what had become of the woman, and what this was all about. More deviltry on the Broken Arrow range, but this time it did not seem to concern him. The grade sloped rather sharply down now, and the horse moved toward the inside of the grade, its head lifted. There was something down there, it seemed.

Silver dismounted and examined the road. There were deep wheel marks, where a vehicle had gone off the road, but there was no canyon here. He led his horse, following the torn earth and broken brush, until he found the stage. It was on its side, the team gone.

Ten feet away, sprawled on his back, where he had been thrown, was Buck Young, the driver. He was dead, but not killed by the wreck. In his forehead, just above his two staring eyes, were the small, black holes made by buckshot. There was another one through his throat. Buck Young had swung his last four on the crooked grades of Broken Arrow.

Silver went on to Sunset Wells. Several people were around the stage depot, waiting for a stage that would never come in. Silver found Dobie Wall in the office, mourning a range song over his mandolin.

He was surprised to see Silver, who said shortly, "Dobie, the stage was attacked about three miles out. Buck Young is dead, loaded with buckshot, the stage wrecked. Get the sheriff!"

Dobie stared at Silver, yelped, "My gosh!" and dived for the doorway.

He found Tug Haggerty in the Saguaro Saloon, and Silver watched them come running to meet him.

"What on earth is this all about?" Tug asked.

Silver told them in a few words exactly what happened. Men had seen the two officers running from the saloon, and came down. Tug told them, "There's been a holdup and Buck Young killed. Dobie, you get Doc Wayland. Tell him to hurry. Silver, will you lead us?"

"Get me another horse, will yuh—mine's been hurt—and he's gone a long ways today."

"I'll get one if I have to steal it," declared the sheriff.

"Take mine," offered a cowboy. "First one on the rack over there, a jug-headed roan."

"Thanks," said Silver.

"You shore got yore clothes busted up," said the cowboy.

"I had a terrible fight with a wild manzanita," said Silver, and headed for the hitch-rack.

They brought Buck Young's body back in the doctor's buckboard. Silver, the sheriff and Dobie went to where Siver had come on the woman. They found the spot where the careening stage had scraped the rocks, throwing her out of the stage. Her hat was there, but now it was only a torn piece of straw and a ribbon.

"If we only knew who she was," said the sheriff. "Prob'ly Buck knew, but he can't tell us. That's the darnedest thing I ever heard of. The stage wasn't robbed. That strong-box is still on the stage. Mebbe it's empty—I dunno. But they didn't even try to see."

"It must've been after dark. Could you see her very good?" asked Dobie.

"She wasn't very big," replied Silver. "Maybe a hundred pounds, and her hair looked dark. I never did see her face good. She'd been crying against the dust, and I reckon her face was kinda smeary."

"Dobie," said the sheriff, "yuh've been kickin' about nothin' ever happenin' around here; so now we've got a murder and a kidnapin'. I hope yuh're happy."

"I'll betcha she's pretty," said Dobie. "Hundred pounds, huh? Man, that's

just the weight I like. You work on the murder, Tug. I'll concentrate on findin' the lady."

BREAKFAST was early at the ranch next morning. Cal Harbin ate his breakfast ahead of the rest, and went away. Old Doughgod was on the job again, only a few small places on his face showed where the glass from the broken bottle had cut him.

Silver told the boys, "We are not startin' any count today, boys. Mebbe we won't need one for a while. Did Harbin give you any orders?"

"Orders?" queried Andy. "Why, he didn't even say good mornin'. We've got to shift a bunch of cows from the Wolf Wells water to Poison Canyon. Water is gettin' short at Wolf, and them knobheads would die from thirst, before they'd hunt other water."

"You boys do that today," said Silver. He told them what had happened the night before. It was rather an amazing story.

"Buck Young was a fine feller," declared Len. "Why'd anybody pot him with a shotgun? If they didn't rob the stage— It's funny."

"I wonder who the woman was," said Andy. "Mebbe somebody that lives here. You say they took here away, Silver?"

"She was gone when I got back to the grade."

"This country can get as tough as a basket of snakes," said Dude Olivera. "I hope they get 'em."

While the boys were saddling their horses, Silver went in for a few words with Tom French. Nora was eating breakfast in her room, and he saw her through the open doorway, but she did not speak. Mrs. Harbin was out in the yard, when he went out, and he stopped to speak with her. Then his lips narrowed grimly. Mrs. Harbin had a bruise on her left cheek, and her right eye was decidedly discolored. But she smiled at him.

Suddenly Silver got an idea. He said to Mrs. Harbin:

"Ma'am, what sort of a lookin' girl was Nora French?"

Mrs. Harbin brushed her hair back with a nervous gesture.

"Well, it has been quite a while since I saw Nora, but I believe she was a brunette—very slender and not very tall. In fact, she was rather tiny, if I remember rightly."

Silver scowled thoughtfully. "Rather tiny," he said, half-aloud.

"Why do you ask about her?" asked Mrs. Harbin.

"Oh, I dunno. I was just wonderin' if that other woman in there filled the bill."

"She doesn't." said Mrs. Harbin flatly.

Silver nodded. He believed he had the solution now.

"Not in any way," added Mrs. Harbin.

"Thank you," said Silver. "I didn't think she did."

The boys were riding away. Silver stopped at the corral and thought it over. Mrs. Harbin had written Nora French. Harbin had taken ranch mail over to Parker Bond. Maybe Nora French had answered Mrs. Harbin's letter, saying when she would arrive. That could be the solution. They had kidnaped the real Nora French, to keep her from exposing the false niece of Tom French.

Silver realized that things were moving to a showdown. They'd kill him now in order to shift the inheritance to Nora, even if Tom French died without changing his will. Nora was the next of kin. There was really nothing now to stand between Silver Malone and their bullets.

Still he wasn't worried or excited. His main object was to find the real Nora French. He didn't want to tell the law what he suspected. This was a matter between himself and Parker Bond and the men who worked with him.

After thinking it over, Silver saddled a horse and went to town. Sunset Wells was excited over the murder of Buck Young, but nothing new had developed. The sheriff and deputy had been out to the wrecked stage, searching for clues. No search had been made for the missing woman, because no one had any idea which way she had been taken. It was a big country down there, and would require hundreds of men to make a thorough search.

"Cal Harbin was in a while ago," said the sheriff," and he wanted to know how you happened to be out there on the grades last night. I told him yuh'd been to Gold Butte. He didn't talk with you this mornin', eh?"

"No, he pulled out about the time

I got up," said Silver.

"Cal pulled out of town about a half-hour ago," offered Dobie. "Didn't you meet him?"

Silver shook his head. "Mebbe he didn't go back home."

"I dunno. He had the ranch mail with him, when I seen him talkin' with Parker Bond. Then he pulled out."

SILVER stayed in town, wondering what became of Cal Harbin. The bartender at the Saguaro told Silver that Cal Harbin took a quart of whisky back to the ranch with him.

"He never drank much," said the bartender. "I dont' know what struck him. He had three drinks over the bar before he left, too."

Silver smiled to himself. Cal Harbin was losing his nerve, and needed something to brace him.

It was nearly dark when Silver saw Andy Head and Len Allen come up a side street in the ranch buckboard and tie up in front of the general store. He went over there. Both cowboys were grim-faced.

"Have yuh seen Cal Harbin around, Silver?" Andy asked.

"No. He was here this mornin', but he pulled out before I got here."

"We just brought Mrs. Harbin in with us," confided Andy. "Cal beat her up again, and she's scared to stay out there. She's with Doc Wayland's wife. I reckon she'll stay there a while. Me and Len are lookin' for Cal."

Silver and his hands stayed in town till evening.

CHAPTER VI

Dust to Dust on the Diamond B

MUCH of the conversation at the Saguaro concerned the murder of Buck Young and the kidnaping of an unknown woman. None of the men present however, had any theory worthy of consideration. Silver listened to the talk, until about ten o'clock. Len and Andy decided to go back to the ranch, and left to get their buckboard and team. Silver went out to the saloon hitch-rack. It was quite dark out there. He came in between his horse and another, and as he reached for the tie-rope, something hit him on the head, and he went down under the feet of rearing horses. Silver dimly realized that he had been hit, but passed out quickly. Some time later he realized that he was on a horse, too weak to hold up his head, on which a thousand devils were hammering.

Consciousness came back to him, and he realized that voices, which sounded far away, were asking him questions. One said, "Are yuh able to talk, Malone?"

Silver heard the question very plainly, but made no effort to answer. A man said, "I shore hope we didn't hit him too hard."

Then he passed out again. The next thing he heard was the bang of a closing door. With an effort he opened his eyes. He was in a rather small room, crudely furnished. On a small table was an oil lamp, turned low, and over there beyond the lamp was a woman. He could see her face, but rather indistinctly. The pain in his head eased a little, and he began to gather up the threads of memory.

Suddenly it all came back to him, and he muttered bitterly, "They got me at the hitch-rack—careless fool."

He was tied in an old barroom chair, and well tied, too. His ankles were bound together and tied to the legs of the chair. His wrists were tied together in front of him, the two ends of the rope looped around the arms of the chair, brought in behind him and tied together. After a short study of his bonds, Silver looked at the woman. He could see her better now, and she was tied, too.

"Who are you, ma'am?" he asked.

"I am Nora French," she replied weakly. "I'm glad you are all right. They were afraid you might die. Who are you?"

"I'm the man who found you on the grade, ma'am."

"Oh!" After a few moments she said, "I'm glad. They said you died in the canyon, and they were worried about a letter you wrote."

In spite of his position in the matter, Silver laughed. Parker Bond believed he had written the letter that would

expose all of them in case Silver Malone was killed. They were afraid to kill him, until they had recovered that letter.

Silver felt better now, but he would have spent his last dollar for a drink of water. The left side of his face felt stiff, but he knew it was from dried blood.

"What are they going to do with us?" Nora French asked.

"I don't know, ma'am," replied Silver. "We'll have to wait and see what their big idea amounts to."

"Are you afraid?" she asked.

"Yes'm."

"One of those men said you had the nerve of the devil."

Silver laughed shortly. "Ma'am," he said soberly, "if the devil had his hands and feet tied to a chair, I reckon he'd lose some of his nerve, too. They'll be comin' back pretty soon. You let me do all the talkin' that's done. They think I'm hurt worse than I am."

They came back a little later, two masked men. But one of them did not fool Silver for a moment. It was Cal Harbin. Silver's head sagged, and he looked at them blankly.

"Ready to talk, Malone?" asked Harbin roughly.

"Water," whispered Silver huskily.

"You ain't goin' to get no water."

"I'll get him a drink," said the other man. "Wait a minute now! We've got to get him back on his feet."

"All right. Get it, and I hope it chokes him."

The man brought a dipper of water, and Silver gulped it eagerly.

"Feel like talkin' now?" he asked.

"I'm awful sick," whispered Silver. "What happened?"

"Never mind that. We want to know where yuh left that letter."

"Letter?" whispered Silver, staring blankly at the two men.

"Yuh know who you are, don't yuh?" asked Harbin's companion.

"Me?" Silver scowled. "Funny thing—I can't remember much. My name is— I dunno right now. It hurts to think."

Harbin swore bitterly. "Fine chance to find out anythin'."

"Mebbe he'll remember," said the other man hopefully. "You lay off the whisky. I'm goin' to town. You've had too much already."

THEY went out and closed the door. Silver signaled the woman to keep silent. One of the men had stopped outside the door and was listening. After a few minutes they heard him go away.

"You are a good actor," she whispered. "They were convinced."

"Don't bank too much on anythin'," he advised her. "These men will kill yuh if it suits them. They're seein' danglin' ropes in their sleep, and there's a hangman's knot on every one."

It was possibly an hour later that Harbin came in alone. He was reeking of whisky, and his legs were none too sure as he closed the door. He came over to the little table and leaned there, leering at Nora French.

"So yuh're Nora French, eh?" he said thickly. "Had t' shove yore nose into this deal, eh? How do yuh like it, eh? Nice recep—reception yuh got."

"I don't know what you are talking about," she said evenly.

"You 'member Jimmy French?" he asked.

"Yes, I remember Jimmy French," she replied.

"Well, take a look at that specimen over there. Does he look like Jimmy French?"

"No," replied Nora, "he is not Jimmy French."

Harbin laughed drunkenly. "I'll say he ain't!"

"Did you know Jimmy French?" asked Nora.

"Know him?" Harbin laughed. "I sent him to the pen for twenty years."

"He never went to the penitentiary," she declared warmly.

"I know he didn't. He got away. But I got rid of him. You ain't never goin' to tell nobody, Nora French. You knew Marion Day."

"Yes, I knew her."

Harbin was just drunk enough to brag, and too drunk to realize what he was telling them. He didn't think that Silver was right in his mind—and what was the difference if he was; Silver Malone would never tell.

"Do you 'member Barney Siebert?" he asked.

"He was the man Jimmy French killed. I didn't know him."

"He was the man they said Jimmy French killed," corrected Harbin. "Him and French fought over Marion Day."

Harbin laughed. "It was a great fight—out there all alone in an old corral. Nobody to see it—excep' me—and they didn't see me. Jimmy French knocked Barney out, but Jimmy was so busted up he could hardly get home. Nex' day they found Barney dead in the corral—and Jimmy's gun was there, all blood and hair. They said Jimmy killed him with the barrel of the gun."

"You killed him?" asked Nora fearfully.

Harbin laughed harshly. "I got the girl, didn't I?"

Harbin turned from Nora French and looked at Silver, who did not seem at all interested.

"How are yuh feelin', you dirty doublecrosser?" asked Harbin.

"Water," said Silver. "Some cold water."

"Yuh'll get nothin' from me!" snapped Harbin, and went out of the room. They heard him stumble away, probably heading back to his bottle.

"Did you hear that terrible confession?" whispered Nora.

"Yes!" whispered Silver. "That is Cal Harbin, Nora."

"I realize it now. What a terrible man!"

Silver had no more comments, because he had discovered that the post under the right arm of his chair, and just in front of the looped rope, which went around the chair-arm, was broken at the top.

Taking up all the possible slack, he managed to get his right elbow against it. Clenching his teeth, twisting as far as he could, he put all his strength against that hard-wood post, and it snapped off short at the chair-seat. This would allow the rope to slide ahead a little.

Nora heard it, and whispered, "What happened?"

"I don't know yet," he replied tensely.

He leaned over, shoving his bound wrists ahead and down as the rope slid along the arm of the chair. He was afraid that the slack was not enough, but his clutching fingers reached down into the top of his right boot. Nora could lean a little sideways and see his feet, and she saw something glisten in his fingers.

It was a nail-file, the blade about three inches long, sharpened to a razor edge. Silver sat up and quickly cut the ropes that held his hands to the chair. A few moments later and his feet were loose. He got up stiffly and came over to her.

"You can hold this and cut my wrists loose," he said calmly.

NORA was so nervous that she could hardly use her fingers, but she managed to cut his hands apart. Swiftly he untied her wrists and ankles, but laid the ropes back in place.

"Don't move 'em," he warned. "We're only halfway out of this. Stay right like you are, Nora."

He tossed his cut ropes under a bunk, picked up a length of rope and went over to the door, but it was locked. He listened intently. Footsteps were coming toward the door. He stepped back to his chair, but reached over and turned the light lower before sitting down. The ropes seemed still to bind him, but it was all camouflage. The door opened and Cal Harbin staggered in. He was quite drunk now.

The light was bad in there. "Ol' lamp mus' be runnin' out of oil." Harbin growled. "But we don't need light; we're havin' good time. I'm runnin' this picnic. Bond's losin' his nerve. Scared of letter!"

Harbin threw back his head and laughed. "I ain't scared. Can't scare me. I'll show him how to run it. I'll—"

A hand was laid on Harbin's shoulder, and he jerked around to see Silver Malone standing up. Harbin's jaw sagged.

And just then Harbin's jaw didn't sag, because Silver Malone hit him on the chin with a right-hand smash that sent him clear back to the door, where he crashed to the floor. Silver got his gun.

He shoved Harbin aside and looked out into a hallway, which opened into a larger room. There was no one in sight. Harbin was groaning, trying to get back on his feet. Silver watched him get up, shaking his head, trying to clear it. He slapped Harbin across the face, and it seemed to clear his fogged brain.

He whirled the man around and forced him down the hallway, the muzzle of the gun boring into his back. Nora followed, her eyes fearful, and

they went into the bigger room.

"Parker Bond's Diamond B ranch-house, eh?" Silver said.

Harbin backed away a few feet, staring at Silver and Nora. He was beginning to realize what had happened. Blood was running from a corner of his mouth, and his eyes held the expression of a trapped wolf.

"Sit down, Harbin," ordered Silver, and the big man sank down in an old rocker. "Yuh're sunk, Harbin."

"I wanted to kill yuh," whispered Harbin. "I told 'em yuh'd only be safe that way, Malone. But Bond, the blasted fool—"

There was a pencil and some paper on the table, along with old magazines and other things that accumulate. Silver picked up the pencil, selected a piece of paper, and said to Harbin, "Pull up to the table, Harbin; I want you to do some writin'."

Harbin looked blankly at him.

"Writin'?" he asked huskily. "What about?"

"A confession of how you murdered a man and sent an innocent man to the penitentiary, Harbin. I heard all of it. Nora can swear to my story, but I want it on paper."

"Why?" asked Harbin, his face white. "Why, Malone?"

"I want to read it to Tom French, Harbin. I want him to know his son is not a murderer."

"I—I won't write it!" husked Harbin.

"You'll write it," said Silver, "just as it happened. If yuh don't, Harbin, I'll take you outside and kill yuh just like you killed that other man in New Mexico."

Harbin looked up at Silver Malone's face, and he knew that Silver Malone was not bluffing.

"They'll hang me," he whispered.

"Yuh'll die anyway," said Silver. "The law will give yuh a trial, but I won't."

Cal Harbin wrote. His fingers shook, and he seemed about to collapse, but he kept at it, while Silver Malone and Nora French watched the slow moving pencil. Then he signed his name, and the pencil fell to the floor.

SO INTENT were they on that confession that neither Nora nor Silver heard two horses stop at the porch. But Harbin heard them, and he tensed in his chair. Silver whirled, as a footstep sounded on the wooden porch, and Parker Bond and his foreman, Slim Carson, stood just outside the doorway staring in at the tableau.

"Look out, Slim!" Harbin screamed.

Slim Carson was lightning fast and shot from his hip. His shot was echoed by the blast from Silver's forty-five. Slim Carson was shocked back against the porch-railing, where he slid down on his haunches, his gun falling away. Nora screamed. Harbin was falling out out of his chair. Slim Carson's first shot had gone wide and saved Cal Harbin from ever facing a human judge.

Parker Bond literally fell down the steps, and ran toward the stable, his pudgy legs fairly churning the ground, but he stopped short. Tug Haverty, Dobie Wall, Andy Head and Len Harris had got off their horses near the stable and were coming over the fence. Each had a gun in his hand. Parker Bond had no place to go; so he just stood there and waited.

Silver Malone and Nora were on the little porch, watching the four men come up to Parker Bond.

"Handcuff him, Tug," said Silver. "He's the brains of the gang."

They led Parker Bond up to the house. Slim Carson was dead, and so was Cal Harbin. Bond's nerve came back to him and he cursed Silver Malone, but the tall cowboy paid no attention to him. He introduced them to Nora French, and told them the whole plot. It was a rather amazing tale, and Parker Bond did not deny it.

"It was a funny deal, Silver," said the sheriff. "Yuh've been through hell and high-water—and for what? You admit that Bond hired you to pull a dirty deal. You shore cleaned up this gang, but you didn't win anythin' for yoreself."

Silver Malone smiled. "Tug," he said, "wouldn't yuh like to see Tom French, when I read that confession to him?"

"Yeah, I believe I would. It ought to help him a lot."

"How'd you boys happen to come out here?"

"Andy was to blame," said Dobie. "You didn't come home last night, and Andy got worried. He saw Slim Carson ride in and go to Bond's office, and it gave him a hunch. He got me and

Tug, and we followed 'em out here. 'Course, when we heard them shots, we came in fast. Gosh, how can we tell Mrs. Harbin?"

"I dunno," said Andy, "but I've jist got a hunch she won't take it too hard."

"All right," said Tug Haverty. "Let's head for town. Leave the bodies as they are, and I'll bring Doc Wayland out. Have you got anythin' to say, Bond?"

"I refuse to talk," replied Bond.

"You didn't have much faith in yore scheme, Bond," Silver said. "You've been stealin' Rafter F cattle and alterin' the brand to yore Diamond B. Over four hundred and fifty head, I understand. You see, Harbin gave me the figures on sales, but they didn't correspond with the railroad records. Want to talk now?"

He didn't. The sheriff said, "When the law finishes with you, Bond, you won't need cattle. Where you're goin' it's too hot."

As they scattered to get horses, Dobie sidled up to Silver.

"Doggone, she's awful pretty," he said quietly. "I like 'em little thataway, Silver. Mebbe I could handle her size."

"I reckon the gate's open, Dobie."

"Man, I hope so!"

They put Parker Bond in jail, and headed for the Rafter F. Andy went to the doctor's home and told Mrs. Harbin what had happened at the Diamond B.

"Take her home in my buggy," said the doctor. "I won't need it until the sheriff gets back here."

Old Doughgod saw the cavalcade and went out to meet them. The pseudo Nora French, realizing that something had gone wrong with the plans, went out into the patio, fearful of the results. There was no escape for her.

Tom French was sitting up in bed, wondering what all the noise was about, as they filed in and stood around.

"Dad," Silver said, "it's all settled. Harbin and Slim Carson were workin' with Bond. Carson shot Harbin by mistake, and Carson is done for. They kidnaped Nora French to keep her from gettin' here, but she's here and unharmed. Now, I want you to listen to this confession:

"I want to confess that I saw a fight about twelve years ago between Jimmy French and Barney Siebert in a old corral near Yuba, New Mexico. Nobody else saw the fight. After Jimmy knocked Barney out and went away, I killed Barney with Jimmy's gun, which he lost in the fight. Jimmy French is innocent.

Cal Harbin."

TEARS were running down the withered cheeks of the almost-sightless old man, and his gnarled hands clutched at the bedding.

"Jimmy," he said chokingly," that's the best news I ever did hear."

Mrs. Harbin was crying, too.

"Why don't you tell him that you are not Jimmy French," she said. "Why make him believe—"

Silver Malone smiled at her and then looked at the old man, who said, "Marion, do you think anybody could fool me?"

"You mean—that—you are Jimmy French?" she gasped.

"I have been all my life, Marion. You

"My Dad Brought the Law to Cherokee Wells, and I'm Going to See that It Stays There!"

THAT was the grim determination of Jim Hardesty when he rode into his homeland to take up the fight on the owlhoots where his brother, Blake, left off. Blake had succeeded the elder Hardesty as Sheriff—but the way things were going lately, it looked as though he was neglecting his duties. That didn't set right with Jim, and he was ready to risk his life, if need be, to get to the bottom of the sinister doings taking place in the valley.

Follow Jim Hardesty into the toughest fight of his life in OWLHOOT GLEAM FOR A RUSTED STAR, the grand, long novelet of the Southwest by Nels Leroy Jorgensen featured next issue. It's a two-fisted, thunder-packed yarn that will hold you breathless from start to finish!

see, folks, after I got away from the law, I headed into the Northwest, and I got into the worst freight-train wreck you ever saw. I didn't see it, myself. I woke up in a hospital several days later, and I was there for three months.

"They said they practised on me. I reckon they did, 'cause I came out of there with a new face and plenty silver plates in my head. Sort of a patch-work job, but it worked. Somehow they got me mixed up with a man named Malone, and they called me Silver Malone."

No one said anything. In fact, there wasn't anything to say. Tom French was smiling. Andy and Len came in, bringing the girl they had known as Nora French. She was frightened, but defiant.

"Tell them the rest of it, Silver Malone," she sneered. "Tell them that you stole horses and shot men in the Northwest."

"Thank you, my dear," Silver replied. "But if you will investigate up in the Northwest, you will find that a horse-thief named Silver Malone was working under cover for the law, and was later offered the job of Deputy U. S. Marshal. The law, my dear girl, don't want me up there, except to give me a good job."

"What's to be done with her, Silver?" asked the sheriff. "She's as bad as the rest of the gang."

"She was a tool of the gang," said Silver quietly. "We've got all the evidence we need. Suppose we ship her out to Gold Butte and let her go from there. I've got a hunch that this has been a good lesson to her."

"You're the boss," said the sheriff. "We'll do that."

They shook hands with Tom French. Silver went out on the porch and watched them get ready to go back to town. Andy took the other Nora French back with him, and there was plenty daylight between them on that buggy seat.

Marion Harbin came out on the porch, her eyes worried.

"Jimmy," she said quietly, "can you ever forgive me for not recognizing you?"

"I'm glad you didn't," he said. "It would have ruined the whole game. But," he smiled at her slowly, "I'll never forgive yuh—if you ever forget how I look—from now on."

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A gun roared outside the window and a bullet smashed through the concertina

BULLET MUSIC

By ANDREW BRONSON

Buck Hartly proves that a concertina can be a mighty dangerous weapon when it comes time to snare a killer and his golden loot!

THE SQUARE D outfit was tough and proud of it. There were folks in Sunrise Valley who claimed the waddies working for Tom Dunn sometimes acted like a pack of hungry wolves, only the wolves were more polite. They often snarled or growled before they bit you.

"I spent two years workin' for the Square D one week," a drifting cowhand announced after he had left the spread a sadder and wiser man. "Leastwise it shore felt that way. I didn't mind the cactus needles in my boots, or the rattlesnake in my bunk. Even the ice water in my hat on a frosty mornin' wasn't so bad. But when I found that skunk in my bedroll I figgered those hombres just weren't friendly."

It was stories like that coming from other waddies who had worked at the Square D for awhile that gave everybody the impression that Dunn and his men just didn't like strangers, and they weren't too fond of their friends.

Yet there had been no serious trouble

from the outfit. When the eight men rode into town for a little celebrating, they seldom got into more than one or two fist fights. They never shot anybody unless someone tried to put a bullet in them first—which rarely happened.

The Square D was a well run ranch. Tom Dunn was an old-timer who looked and sounded like a turkey gobbler, but he got a day's work out of everyone of his men, and nobody tried to boss the boss.

"Nothin' wrong with my boys, 'ceptin' they're kind of high spirited," Dunn often said. "Ain't one of them who would hurt a fly—providin' it was so far away they couldn't reach it."

With an outfit like that, Buck Hartly sure made a big mistake riding up to the ranch looking for a job, early one morning. The outfit had just finished breakfast, during which they had found the coffee not quite to their liking and informed old "Limpy" Watson, the cook, that if it happened again they would hang him from a sour apple tree. Limpy had retorted with gestures enhanced by the long bladed carving knife he held in his hand, that if there was any more back-talk from a bunch of such dubious ancestry he would cut their throats personally and individually.

Thus it happened that Hartly arrived just when tempers were short and horses selected for the day were unusually frisky. Since the Square D cavvy consisted of a number of horses that had inherited their dispositions from those of their riders, to call them "frisky" would be putting it mildly.

IN THE corral Joe Cooper, the foreman of the outfit, was having difficulty in roping a big roan that did not feel it was a nice morning for riding and was successful in placing a number of the other milling horses between himself and the foreman. Cooper's language as he made his throw and missed was blistering, colorful and not in the least redundant.

"My, my," said Buck Hartly as he sat in the saddle of his pinto outside the corral watching everything that went on. "Don't believe I've seen so much excitement since we knocked down the wasps' nest at the Sunday school picnic."

One of the Square D outfit had been thrown out of the saddle. Another had been kicked on the shin. The corral gate had swung back and hit another man in the face. In the estimation of all the ranchhands, levity upon the part of a stranger was not only uncalled for, but better left some place else.

Cooper flung down his rope and headed for the corral gate. He was big and hard-faced, and looked more like a gorilla going for a stroll than a human being. For the present the other men all lost interest in their horses. Their gaze was centered on the husky young stranger in range clothes who sat in the saddle serenely watching operations.

The Square D crew gathered from all directions. Hartly waited until they were all assembled in a group in front of him, then held up his left hand in a gesture of silence.

"My fellow citizens," he said in a loud and ringing voice, "I'm plumb glad that you've felt it worth while to take this brief interval from yore daily toil to hear what I have to say to you. While there's maybe some who feel that my worthy opponent for this position of trust and honor is nothin' more than a horse-thief, a rustler, and a man who would steal pennies from a baby's bank, I reckon such accusations are unfair. Cuthbert Clambake has no children!"

The Square D outfit had expected practically anything from the stranger with the exception of a speech like that. Hartly's words left them confused and a bit goggle-eyed. They looked closer and noticed the pearl-handled Colt in his holster, the way his right hand was always close to the butt of the gun. Neither could they ignore the strength of his face, and the ease with which he sat in saddle. The stranger looked like he might be a salty gent.

"Who is this Cuthbert Clambake yuh're talkin' about?" Joe Cooper asked in a surprisingly mild tone.

Hartly looked at the foreman in surprise. "You don't know?"

"No," said Cooper. "I don't."

"Come to think of it, I don't either," Hartly said. "Reckon we might call him a mythical character and let it go at that."

"Oh, shore," said Cooper a bit blankly. "And who might you be? What office are yuh runnin' for anyway, stranger?"

"The name is Buck Hartly," said the man in the saddle. "And I'm not runnin' for any office. Just repeatin' a speech

I heard a feller say once. Shore was pretty. Took me a long time to memorize all those big words. There's a lot more of it. Would yuh like to hear it?"

"Thanks, no," said Cooper hastily.

"Who does the hirin' and firin' for this outfit?" Hartly asked.

"The boss mostly," said Cooper. "But I'm the foreman and Tom Dunn lets me pick my men. Why?"

"Thought maybe yuh might be needin' an extra hand," said Hartly. "So I rode out here this mornin' to ask about that."

Cooper looked at the other men. Their expressions were too innocent to be healthy for Hartly. Just a bunch of angels with dusty faces.

"Come to think of it, we could use a good hand," said the foreman thoughtfully. "You figger you could hold down a job with this outfit, Hartly?"

Hartly swung out of the saddle. Standing there beside his horse he was as tall as Cooper who was over six feet. He dropped the reins, ground-hitching the pinto. Then he looked at the eight men and grinned.

"Reckon I wouldn't have any trouble doin' my work here," he said. "Heard the Square D was an easy-goin' spread. Course I've worked for some right tough outfits so I'll probably find it right mild around here. Good thing, for it'll give me more chance to play the concertina."

COOPER looked blank. He stared at the tall stranger. "The what?" he asked.

"The concertina, a wind instrument of the seraphine family with free reeds, forming a link in the evolution of the harmonium from the mouth organ, intermediate links being the cheng and the accordion," said Hartly. "But since the brains of you gents probably matches yore beauty, I'll make it simple and say a concertina is like an accordion, only smaller."

"We been insulted!" shouted redheaded, bowlegged little Sandy Water, who was usually the first member of the Square D outfit to start a fight. "Come on, Dan. Let's teach this big mouth a lesson."

Water and Dan Parker, who was about Sandy's size, rushed at Buck Hartly with fire in their eyes and murder in their hearts. The rest of the outfit decided two half-pints against one full size measure was fair play. They stepped back to watch and give a rousing cheer for the home team when victory was won.

Hartly waited until the two small men were close enough, then he reached out, grabbed them both by their trouser belts and lifted them off the ground. Holding Water by his left hand and Parker by his right he performed a feat of strength that had the other men gasping. With the two men kicking and clawing like a pair of angry wildcats, Hartly extended his arms so he was holding them at either side of his body at shoulder level.

"Great clouds of smoking blue blazes!" muttered Cooper as he watched. "I ain't never seen anythin' like it."

For a moment Hartly held the two men in that position. Then he lowered his arms, released his grip and let both of them drop to the ground. Sandy Water scrambled to his feet, looked wildly at Hartly, then raced into the corral, found his horse and climbed into the saddle. Parker got up and chased after the other man.

"As I was sayin'," remarked Hartly. "A concertina is a right nice instrument."

"All right, I believe yuh," said Cooper. "Yuh're hired, Hartly, providin' the boss has no objections." The foreman glared at the other men. "Get yore horses, and start roundin' up them strays over in the east section. Move! Yuh think we got all day to stand around here gabbin'!"

When Cooper talked like that the rest of the outfit knew it was time to move fast and not stop to do any arguing. Fortunately all of their horses were still inside of the corral, some of them saddled and ready, others still to be roped.

In a few minutes all of the men with the exception of Cooper and Hartly were mounted and ready to ride. The foreman held the gate open as the waddies rode out, then closed it after them.

"Go on, get workin'," Cooper shouted. "I'll ride out and see how yuh're gettin' along later."

The seven men rode away. Cooper and Hartly stood watching until they disappeared in the early morning heat haze. Then the foreman turned to the new member of the outfit.

"Turn yore pinto into the corral," Cooper said. "I'll show yuh the other horses yuh can pick for yore string later."

"Thanks," Hartly said.

He unsaddled the pinto and drove the horse into the corral. Then he carried his rigging to the harness shed and left it there. When he stepped out with his saddle roll Cooper was waiting for him. There was a scowl on the face of the big, gorilla-like man.

"I feel awful," Cooper said. "Yuh're the first stranger I ever hired for this outfit that I liked. Shore is a pity."

"Don't you feel too badly about it," said Hartly soothingly. "I've had a few friends here and there, and knowin' me didn't kill them."

"It ain't that," said Cooper. "Just seems a shame for a feller like you to die so young."

"Huh? Hartly stared at the foreman in amazement. "Why should I die? I ain't even sick."

"Lead poisoning makes a man mighty sick sometimes," said Cooper. "Come on, I'll show you yore bunk."

The foreman led the way to the bunkhouse with Hartly following. They went inside and Cooper indicated Hartly's bunk. The new member of the outfit started to thrust his bedroll under the bunk when Cooper spoke.

"Don't believe I ever seen a concertina," he said.

HARTLY grinned and took the concertina out of the bedroll. He seated himself on the edge of the bunk and began to play. He did it well, and Cooper was unconsciously tapping his foot to the music as he listened.

"That's shore nice," said Cooper when Hartly finally stopped playing. "Makes me feel all the worse when I think about you gettin' killed."

"Let's stop talkin' around in circles," said Hartly, putting the concertina away under the bunk. "Who do you think is goin' to kill me and why?"

"That's just what worries me," Cooper said. "I don't know. It might be Sandy Water or Dan Parker, or maybe one of the other men." The foreman dropped down on a bunk. "Reckon I better explain just what I mean."

"It might be a good idea," said Hartly, seating himself on his bunk. "Go ahead."

"As you may have heard folks around this part of the country think the Square D is a rough and tough outfit. They're right about that, but we ain't outlaws or gunslicks. All the same Dunn and I feel that we have a dangerous killer working here."

"Why?" asked Hartly as the foreman paused.

"'Cause in the last month or so a lone bandit has held up the owners of a couple of outfits around here and stole the ranch payrolls," said Cooper. "The bandit was masked and knocked out the ranchers with a gun barrel, so nobody recognized him. But on the nights the robberies happened I found horses in the corral that had been ridden hard and recent."

"Horses from anybody's special string?" Hartly asked.

"No, that's just it. They were always some of the extra horses. About a week ago I talked to the boss about it. The local sheriff ain't worth a hoot, so we decided not to tell him anything. Tom Dunn made up his mind to write a letter to the Cattlemen's Protective Association, Dunn being a member and all, askin' 'em to send a man to investigate under cover."

"Dun wrote that letter," Hartly said and it was hard to tell whether it was a statement or a question, though the foreman did not notice that. "But what has this got to do with me."

"When I was talkin' to the boss we discovered someone was listening outside," Cooper said. "He got away, but there wasn't no doubt he was one of our men. He heard everything we said, even to hirin' the CPA man as a new member of the outfit."

"And yuh figger I'm that man," said Hartly. "So does this killer who's a member of the outfit. You reckon the chances of him tryin' to down me before I can catch him are good?"

"Good my foot!" said Cooper as he stood up. "They're ace high!"

"But suppose I'm not the CPA man?" demanded Hartly.

"The thief don't know that," said Cooper. "So yuh'll probably be just as dead either way."

Which was the situation Buck Hartly found confronting him when he joined the Square D outfit. As days passed he did his work well and proved a top-hand. He found he liked Tom Dunn, who, despite looking and sounding like a turkey gobbler, ruled his outfit with an iron hand. He was a cattleman of the old school and he had learned and studied his lessons by hard experience.

Hartly discovered that he had made a pair of enemies in Sandy Water and Dan Parker. The two men left no doubt in anyone's mind that they hated the new member of the outfit, but just how dangerous they might be Hartly had yet to learn.

There was one thing that practically all of the men liked when they gathered in the bunkhouse in the evenings. That was the music that Hartly squeezed out of the concertina. He knew a lot of good old songs and played them well.

Late one night Hartly awoke from a sound sleep, suddenly conscious there was someone standing beside his bunk in the darkness. He reached for his gun which he always kept under his pillow.

"It's all right, Buck," came a whisper. "I'm Cooper. Come outside. I want to talk to you."

Hartly quickly sat up. He was fully dressed save for his boots and he pulled them on. The foreman had left the bunkhouse and Hartly followed him.

"Found a horse, that's just been ridden hard down in the corral," said Cooper as they moved away from the bunkhouse. "Bet there's been another robbery. I was in town this afternoon and seen Seth Owen of the Bar O comin' out of the bank just before it closed for the day. Bet it was Owen who was robbed."

"Could be," said Hartly softly. "But I don't remember anybody leavin' the bunkhouse tonight. But I been sleepin' right soundly."

IN THE moonlight Hartly saw the foreman rub his chin thoughtfully.

"Dan Parker left," said Cooper. "And just got back. I heard him come in. That's why I went to look at the horses."

"Parker, eh?" said Hartly. A thought struck him. "You ever stop to think that if the killer just rode in, his saddle-blanket and hull are shore to be damp and sweat-stained from the horse?"

"No, I never thought of that," said Cooper slowly. "But yuh're right. Let's go take a look in the harness shed."

They went to the harness shed and examined the saddles. Since each man in the outfit had his own kak and was particular about it, the saddles were easily identified.

"This is it," said Cooper, examining a saddle in the light of a match. "Blazes! This is my hull!"

"So it is." Hartly came over and studied the saddle in the light of another match. "Looks like this robber is smart, Joe. Too smart to use his own saddle, so he took yores." Idly Hartly picked up one of the saddle skirts, looked at it and dropped it again. "And you think it was Parker."

"That's right," said the foreman. The match in his hand had gone out, and the flame in Hartly's fingers died away. "The robber is smarter than I figgered."

"He's smart all right," said Hartly as he headed out of the shed. "But I've got an idea he's goin' to tangle himself in his own rope."

They went back to the bunkhouse, turned into their bunks and finished their night's sleep. There was nothing they could do until morning.

The next day Hartly and the rest of the Square D outfit learned that someone had entered the Bar O ranchhouse during the night, hit Seth Owen such a brutal blow on the head that it had killed him, and then had stolen the ranch payroll money.

With the other men Hartly spent a busy day working out on the range. When night came some of the outfit decided to ride into town. It was the first of the month and Dunn had paid them off. Hartly did not feel like going with them.

He was sitting alone in the bunkhouse an hour or so after the men had departed. On the wall beside him a lantern burned, and as he sat in a chair he was softly playing the concertina.

Abruptly from outside an open window a gun roared and a bullet tore a hole in the bellows of the concertina. Hartly's right hand flashed to his gun. The Colt came up roaring just as the man outside the window risked showing himself in order to make sure of his second shot.

He never fired it. Before the man outside could again pull the trigger, Hartly's bullet caught him in the chest just over the heart. There was a thud and then silence. Hartly put down the concertina and went to the door, his gun still ready in his hand.

Up at the ranchhouse he heard shouts. Tom Dunn had heard the shooting and was coming to see what it was all about. Hartly stared down at the figure sprawled on the ground. Then he knelt down beside the man he had wounded, the man he knew was slowly dying.

"Fool play on my part, Buck," Joe Cooper said weakly. "But when I seen yuh noticed the stirrups last night, I just had to try and down yuh."

Hartly was conscious of Dunn and the ranch cook and a couple of other men standing there silently listening, but they didn't seem to matter.

"That's right, Joe," he said. "I did notice the stirrups on yore saddle. They were set for the legs of a tall man just as they've always been. If Parker or Water had been usin' that saddle, they would have shortened those stirrups."

"Yuh'll find the money I stole in that old well that ran dry," Cooper sounded very tired. "Wanted to have a lot of money so I could buy a ranch of my own somewhere else. I—I'm sorry my bullet smashed the concertina. I liked the music. Funny, I knew from the first I'd have to try to down you."

"You were smart, Joe," Hartly said. "Telling Dunn about those freshly ridden horses because you had been ridin' them yoreself. Tryin' to make me think it was Parker. Right, too, in figgerin' I was the man the CPA sent to investigate after we got Dunn's letter."

"Shore, I was smart all right," Cooper said, and his voice was very faint now. "Too smart to live! The music—shore was pretty." He shuddered and grew still.

Hartly looked at the other men then. He stared at the faces of Dunn and Water and Parker and the old cook. He'd had a job to do and it was done. For a young man he felt old and tired, with a strange sort of inner weariness.

"I hope I can get the concertina fixed," he said. "I'll miss the music." He glanced at the dead man. "And so will he."

Headliners in the Next Issue!

RANGE thrills galore in OWLHOOT GLEAM FOR A RUSTED STAR, the exciting featured complete novelet by Nels Leroy Jorgensen in the next issue! It's the story of Jim Hardesty, whose father brought law to Cherokee Wells and who returns there when sinister treachery stalks, ready to live up to his traditions with the aid of his flaming six-guns! A humdinger packed with quick-trigger action!

ANOTHER grand novelet next issue is THE DISTANT GUNS, by Wayne D. Overholser. This is a yarn of the difficult period following the Civil War—and of the struggle of Bill Smith, held as a spy, to prevent treachery from disrupting the nation. It's an inspiring and colorful story that brings back a significant era in an amazingly vivid manner.

NEXT issue also brings you the latest adventure of Chick Bowdrie, famous fighting Ranger, in MORE BRAINS THAN BULLETS, a smashing tale by Louis L'Amour. Chick sits back on the porch of the Bon Ton Cafe and lets the clues in this case come to him—until it's time to act. And then he's a veritable whirlwind!

GET ready for laughs—a Ham and Egg story coming up! It's HAM'S FOXY FUMBLE, by Alfred L. Garry, and it's positively sidesplitting. The Sweetgrass lawmen bet on the hometown football game—and the result's a scrimmage of screams.

EXCITEMENT on every page of A TEXAS GRAVE TO FILL, by Walker A. Tompkins, a smashing novelet of the trail-herd days in which Reid Edwards, salty Lone Star cowman, proves that all good things can stand the test of time. Look forward to a bang-up reading treat!

Clubbing his rifle, Jake rushes Ham and swings viciously

HAM'S LONG SHOT

By ALFRED L. GARRY

The Sweetgrass lawmen use their own peculiar methods to save a rough-riding rodeo cowboy from the shadow of the hangnoose!

HAM'S feet bang down from the desk top. My deputy quick brushes the tobacco flakes from his shirt front, preens his walrus mustache, spits on his hands, and plasters his sparse hair into place right elegant.

I glance out the window to see what's the cause of my pardner's sudden sprucing up. Then I quick reach for some papers, shake the dust off of them, and commence to read, frowning businesslike. For outside Molly North is winding the reins of her lathered team around the whipstock. She climbs heavily from her buckboard.

You wouldn't think to look at her that Molly North pays more taxes than anyone else in Sweetgrass County, and has enough dinero to start a couple of banks. She dresses like a scrubwoman making the grubline; scuffed run-over cowboy boots, canvas riding skirt, and a patched

and worn man's corduroy mackinaw. The floppy brim of her battered old sombrero jounces up and down like a dude on a postage stamp saddle as she clumps determinedly across the planks toward our office.

"Molly's mad and in trouble," I say out of the side of my mouth to Ham. "Look at the way her mule jaw is sticking out!"

"I'll thank yuh not to refer to the face of the woman I'd like to love as mulish!" Ham rebukes, plumb top-lofty.

"You fortune hunting jackass!" I mutter as the door is flung wide.

Molly North stands framed in the doorway a minute. She fills the entire frame, a huge, square, and angular woman. Even her craggy face is blocked out, like them crude axe hewed wooden statues a feller used to see in lumber camps.

"Come in," Ham springs up and bats a billow of dust off a chair with his sombrero, "Take the weight off yore feet!"

The floor shakes as Molly jams her boots toward it. She surveys us coldly for a silent minute, not warming up to Ham's most ingratiating smile.

"You two galoots take off them law stars!" she clips unceremonious in her rusty hinge voice.

"Meanin' this is a social call?" Ham beams hopefully. "In that case, Mrs. North, I'm askin' yuh to a oyster lunch at the Hasty-Tasty Cafe!"

"Social, nothing!" Widow North snaps. "I—I—"

HER expression melts and her voice trails off in a sobbish catch. I'll be darned if the old gal's eyes don't film over. That hard face of hers, which in the old days when we were fighting for law and order could watch a rustler swing without changing expression, softens an instant. She grips her hands on the edge of the chair a moment until the knuckles show white, fighting back something. Then her face hardens again into cast iron. Her trouble is bad.

"I got to talk to you two old buzzards as man to man," she rasps. "Put them stars out of sight. When I walk out this door, I don't want no lawmen to remember what I'm going to tell you. You mosshorns will have to help me settle this as old friends!"

"Molly, I'm always ready to be more than a friend—" Ham offers, bouncing out of his chair, and starting around his desk to comfort her.

"You fortune hunting grubliner, keep your levis on that seat! Don't interrupt, or I'll wrap my chair around your neck!" she glares, her old sweet self again. Then she adds quickly, "But you can take me to lunch. But don't get no idears. I'm just saving six-bits, that's all!"

Ham's face falls like a bride's cake. Under the desk, he rubs his thumb and forefinger together, signaling he's broke—as usual. I reach into my desk like I'm getting the makings, and slip him two bucks instead of a tobacco sack.

"What's rowelling you, Molly?" I ask. "We ain't forgetting how fine you and Mr. North treated us when we first grublined into these parts. We'll be proud to help as old friends, and plumb forget we're lawmen."

"Yuh darned tootin'!" Ham agrees warmly. "Want some hairpin run outa the country kinda extra unlegal like? Why, Molly, darlin', I'd even bushwhack—"

"Ham, stop your infernal foolish running off at the mouth!" she bellows. "No, fellows, my trouble is close to my heart. Look."

Molly fumbles in her mackinaw pocket and hauls out a scrap of paper. She unfolds it and shoves it slowly across the desk to me. I study the paper carefully. It's the seller's carbon copy of an ordinary bill-of-sale for twenty-five prime beef.

"Paul sold 'em," I nod. "Gosh, it's hard to realize your boy's grown up. It seems only yesterday that me an' Ham were teaching him how to ride."

"Done a darned good job of it too!" Ham brags. "That son of yours is a top bronc twister!"

"And a thief!" Molly states woodenly. "I found that bill of sale in his old vest. He sold them beef without my knowledge and pocketed the money!"

"How come your foreman, Jake Sutter, didn't know about the loss?" I ask.

"Jake's been harping that our beef gathers have been running shy for the past two years," Molly says in a low monotone. "Always just after Paul has left for college. I want to know what Paul is doing with the money. You fellows keep an eye on him—as friends, mind you, not lawmen."

"I just can't believe it." Ham tugs at his mustache thoughtful. "Not that boy!"

"I—I can't either. He's so kind and considerate around the home," Molly hangs her head. "And he's practically engaged to Caroline Spellman. I just won't have him breaking her heart. My boy—"

Folks, me an' Ham see something that I'll bet no other person in Sweetgrass County has ever witnessed. Not even when Mr. North was brought home across his saddle after a stampede. Molly North sniffs, snorts, and quickly raises her neckerchief to her eyes.

"Darn it!" she mumbles, heartbroken. "I'm going to cry!"

"Go right ahead, Molly," Ham says, blowing his own nose hard. "We all set a heap of store by your son. An' we ain't goin' to see him commence trompin' the hoot-owl trail!"

A sudden rabble of cries jumps me an' Ham to the window.

"Ride him, cowboy!"

"Let'r buck!"

"Scratch him, kid!"

Down the street, the sidewalks are lined with wild yelling hairpins. In the middle of the street, a peeler is putting on as pretty an exhibition of close-seated bronc riding as we've seen in a long time. He's scratching fore and aft and fanning joyous with his sombrero. Top form rodeo riding, that!

Molly wipes her eyes, swings open the door, and clumps to the edge of the porch. We side her. The woman's eyes are bright and shining as the young fellow rides the snuffy bronc to a standstill.

"That's Paul!" she says proudly. "He sure can take the kinks out of a twister without savaging it!"

"Yup," Ham agrees. "I'll just walk up there and see what it's all about."

"Me, too," I chime in, not telling Molly that the city council has passed an ordinance making it illegal to ride a wild one on our main street.

"Just you go home, Molly," Ham says. "We'll keep an eye peeled. We'll find out what that boy of yours is doing with the money he's been getting from your beef."

"Hold your horses, Ham," Molly snaps, her old acid self again. "You're forgetting you invited me to lunch. Oysters, remember. I aim to collect!"

ME AN' HAM push through the crowd to where Paul is standing. He's patting the bronc's neck, talking to it in low soothing tones, calming the wild-eyed horse. The lad's a natural. A horse gentler, not an abusing bronc buster that ruins a mount's spirit.

"Son," Ham says kindly, "that was a mighty sweet ride. But after this when yuh fork a twister, take him outa town a ways. A new ordinance we passed while you was at college prohibits rough riding in the street."

"Tell that officious so-an'-so to go to the devil!" a voice rasps.

Ham whirls to face Jake Sutter, Molly North's foreman. Jake's a tough hombre, big, paunchy, with a week-old beard that don't quite cover the white knife scar that slopes down from his thick-lipped mouth. He runs his crews with a heavy hand, and although he's got plenty of cow-savvy, he ain't liked by his men or the ranchers he's got to do business with. The only reason Molly keeps him on is because he's a distant kin.

"Aw, heck, Jake," Paul grins, "these mosshorns don't make the laws. They just enforce 'em."

"Yeah?" Jake sneers. "Let's see 'em stop me!"

With that, Jake swings aboard the bronc Paul has just tamed. The foreman rowels the heaving bronc unmercifully, lashing savagely at the same time with his quirt. The surprised bronc shoots its spine, crashing sideways into the hitching-rack, spooking the horses there. Jake jerks the cayuse's head around, scattering waddies on the sidewalk like leaves before a cyclone.

Ham goes livid with rage. Yet there's nothing he can do. Jake can ride that now spoiled twister up and down the street, flaunting the law, and then spur out of town. The only way to enforce our new ordinance would be to put a slug in Jake or the bronc. And that would be political suicide.

"Here, Ham, use this!"

Ham whirls. Caroline Spellman presses her tallowed eight-strand into my pardner's hand.

Ham don't build a loop. He just quick-twitches the fine supple string. The noose snakes out, settles around Jake's thick body. Ham whirls, snubbing the rope around his hips, and digs in his heels. Jake hits the end of the

twine. Ham's braced boot-heels turn a furrow as he sits on the snub. The skin riata sings for an instant like a fiddle string. Jake arcs from the saddle as though a charge of powder has been set off under him. His body hits the dust with a loud plop. Ham charges forward, jerks the befuddled foreman to his feet by a handful of vest.

"You're under arrest!" Ham clips.

Sutter snarls a scorching string of oaths. His right hand hip-streaks. But he's woozy slow. Ham's all set for it. As the foreman's fingers curl his walnut, Ham flashes for his gun. His cutter sweeps upward in a smooth whizzing motion, and pistol whips the foreman alongside of the head. Sutter's knees sag. Ham raps him sharply on the wrist with his cutter barrel. The foreman's gun drops to the dust.

"Jedge Mirander, Jedge Mirander!" Ham bellows, "Front an' center, Jedge."

"Comin'! Comin'!" the judge answers, bustling through the crowd. "Yuh want a law court?"

"Yup," Ham answers.

"I declare court in secession here an' now." Judge Mirander sticks his thumbs in the armholes of his vest, plumb important. "What's the charges, officer?"

"Jedge, this hairpin twisted a wild one deliberate in the street," Ham charges.

"Guilty as blazes. I mean, Guilty as charged," Judge Mirander gets himself back on the legal track quick. "The fine is two-fifty.

"But," Judge Mirander goes on, rubbing his chin reflective, "when this rumpus started, I was holdin' three kings. There was ten bucks in the kitty. So the charges and court costs on this case is ten dollars in addition to the fine. Twelve-fifty please!"

"Pay up, Sutter," Ham clips when the crowd gets through laughing.

Mouthing curses under his breath, Jake Sutter reaches into his inside vest pocket for his wallet. He's still plenty punch drunk. As he thumb-fingeredly fishes for the money, he accidentally drops his wallet. Ham swoops it up.

As Ham hands the wallet back to the foreman, I see his eyebrows do a quick cat's back. Jake hands Judge Mirander the money, stalks to his bronc, mounts up, and racks out of town, a mighty sore and revengeful hombre.

"Thanks for the loan of your twine," Ham says, recoiling the fine lariat and handing it back to Caroline.

"I hate to see Jake get away with anything," Caroline's pretty eyebrows come together in a frown. "I don't like the influence he seems to have over Paul."

"You're just jealous," Paul laughs, taking her arm.

"No, I'm not!" Caroline stamps her small boot. "It's just the way he keeps telling you what a fine bronc peeler you are. He's always cutting out wild horses for you to ride. And you are silly enough to fall for it. You know as well as I do, Paul," she pleads, "that a man who takes the rough off of too many wild ones ends up on queer street—just like a punch drunk prize fighter."

"I've got to keep in form," Paul laughs. Then he adds seriously, "No hard feelings, lawmen, for the way you took Jake down a couple of pegs. He had it coming!"

"Keno, son!" Ham grins, friendly enough. "Just keep your nose clean so's we don't have to have any official business with you!"

I'm watching Paul closer than a river boat poker gambler watches the players as the stakes get high. But Paul just grins good natured at Ham's probing thrust.

"I'll twist my wild ones outside of town after this," he says, slipping the punch.

Paul slides his arm into Caroline's, and together the kids clump off. If that boy's got a guilty conscience, he's shore better at hiding it than any hoot-owl I know!

THAT evening me an' Ham drop into Freddie's Bar. Something is up. Instead of being lined up at the bar, the waddies are clustered three deep around a table—the sign a big-stake game is going on. Me an' Ham elbow our way through the crowd.

Hunched over the table is Paul North. He's rattling a pair of dice in his hand. He blows on them, and with a "Come on, baby," bounces them against the seat of a stool they've got on the table for a back board. A pair of deuces turn up.

He's playing with a hard hatted drummer. The salesman takes the dice, cups them in the palm of his hand, bounces them against the back board. They come his way.

"Your luck is running bad, son," he laughs, disarmingly, collecting, "but it can't go on forever. It's due for a change. Want to keep on playing?"

"North's lost about five hundred bucks to the dude," a waddy whispers out of the side of his mouth to us. "Started as a two-bit game, an' kept gettin' stiffer."

Paul's eyes are glittering with the same dogged determination that is making him one of the best bronc toppers in the county.

"Sure, I'm sticking!" Paul clips. "Excuse me while I get into my private First National Bank."

The crowd chuckles as Paul pulls off his boot, fishes around in the toe, and hauls out a crumpled five hundred dollar bill.

Ham frowns furious. He's thinking the same as me. Molly North must give Paul a mighty decent allowance while he's at college. But it shore ain't enough so's he can tromp around with five hundred dollar notes in the toe of his boots, or afford to drop the heap of dinero he has in this crap game. Has that kid been knocking down on his Ma? Darned if it don't look like it.

Ham nudges me and turns toward the bar. Even Freddie has left the bar to watch the high stake game. Ham goes behind the bar, and picks up two of the biggest clear glasses he can find. He commences to draw us some beer.

"Say," I shame him. "Freddie don't serve beer in these elegant glasses. He uses them thick mugs."

"Mind your own business," Ham grins.

I commence wetting my nose as I walk back to the game. But Ham, who is noted for the way he can polish off a beaker, don't touch his. Intent as a miner panning gold, Ham watches the swift shaking of the dice. Lady Luck shore is a friend of that hard-faced salesman. She rides his dice to the tune of about three out of every five passes.

"Cuss it," Paul grins lopsided as he takes a small pot, "it would be my luck to win a little one."

"Drink your beer, Ham," I nudge my pardner. "It's losing its head."

"Shore, shore," Ham nods, edging his way closer and closer toward the drummer.

Just as the salesman casts the dice, Ham accidently jostles his elbow. The dice clatter to the floor.

"Sorry," Ham says, swooping like a hawk, and picking up the ivories before the salesman can shove back his chair to recover them.

My clumsy pardner does the darnedest thing. He fumbles the dice like a cook juggling hot biscuits. They pop out of his fingers, and splash right into his glass of beer.

As Ham peers down into the amber fluid, a deepening frown furrows his brow. I edge closer, glance at the dice in the bottom of the glass, and then quickly edge my way around the table until I'm right behind that pot bellied drummer. Little beads of sweat commence to glisten in the folds of his fat neck, and he commences to fidget in the chair like he's got nettles in his pants.

"Funny, dude," Ham says in a loud laughing voice, "I got just the spots you called! Wonder if I could do it again?"

HAM pulls a long handled spoon he's filched from the bar from his vest pocket and fishes out the dice. The room is as silent as the lone prairie as my pardner carelessly tosses them dice back into his glass of beer. They float to the bottom, turning over only once, and settle with the same identical spots uppermost again!

"Queer dice!" A waddy beside me growls.

"If—if them dice are queer, it ain't my fault!" the drummer commences to bluster. "They are house dice. Let me see 'em!"

"That right?" Ham inquires of Freddie.

"I furnished them a pair," Freddie replies cautiously.

"Let me see 'em," the drummer insists, getting up and reaching for the dice.

"Sit down!" I bark, shoving him roughly back into the chair. "Show him the dice, Ham."

"Shore," Ham agrees.

But my pardner ain't taking no chances. He takes out his stock knife and scratches a cross on each of the dice. The dude blanches the color of a sick Chinaman when Ham rolls them across the table toward him. The same spots turn up again! Like they were a pair of coiled rattlers, the salesman backs away.

Ham flounces around the table. He jerks the drummer to his feet.

"Get them hands of yores way up!" he blares. "I'm searchin' yuh!"

"You—you can't search me without a warrant!" the drummer yammers.

"No?" Ham's voice is silky. "I could leave yuh here while I went for a warrant. But yuh know these boys here are mighty impatient. They might take it into their heads to stage a tar an' feather party while I'm gone. Now get them hands up, you!"

Ham feels around the drummer's vest, locates a trick pocket, and pulls out two other pair of dice. He tosses them to Freddie.

"Can yuh identify any of these?" he asks.

"One," Freddie says examining them. "One of mine had a little nick off the ace side. Yeah, this one is mine."

"All right, Egg," Ham nods, "slip the cuffs on Mr. Crooked Dice and make him cough up all his winnings."

After the drummer has passed back the money, Ham indicates that we want a few words with Paul, who's looking mighty sheepish. The fellers fade.

"You was a proper sucker, Paul," Ham shames the boy. "That sleight of hand loaded dice switch is tinhorn stuff. You fell for it like a slick-ear, Paul."

"I'm thankful for the way you showed up that drummer," Paul says, blushing to the roots of his hair. "Jake Sutter, who's played dice with this sport on his last two trips through town, told me he was all right."

"So?" Ham says, pinning down Paul's eyes. "Jake introduced you to this tinhorn? Well, there was a little over a thousand dollars of your money in this game. That's a lot of dinero for a college more-soft, or soft-more, whatever yuh call 'em, to be packin' around. Do yuh mind tellin' me where yuh got it, Paul?"

"Gosh, Ham, I do," Paul says earnestly. "I can't tell you!"

"Even if I take my star off, Paul?" Ham pleads, unpinning his badge. "Now Paul, just as man to man, does your Ma know how yuh got this dinero?"

"No."

"Does Caroline?"

"No!"

Then Paul looks Ham square in the eye as he says slowly, "Ham, it's nobody's business how I came by this money. That's final!"

Danged if I don't like the way that youngster's chin comes out. Right or wrong, I like a hairpin who sticks by his guns. And it shore does my heart good to see this boy stick by his! Both me an' Ham know Paul ain't ever going to tell us about that money until he is ready—if he ever is.

But just the same, knowing what we do about that bill-of-sale made out in his name for his mother's beef, we resolve then and there to run the thing down. Paul's too fine a feller to let get started tromping the outlaw trail. Sure, he might figure rustling a few of his Ma's cows ain't stealing. But someday he'll find it mighty easy to run off some cows belonging to someone else. And once a feller's feet are on the hoot-owl trail, the downward grade is mighty easy.

AFTER we've turned the key on the drummer, Ham rummages around in his desk until he finds a poker deck. Spreading out the cards, he deliberately commences to stack the deck.

"You aim to give Paul North another lesson in crooked gambling?" I ask, mighty puzzled.

"Nope," Ham grins from ear to ear, taking down the jailhouse key. "I'm goin' to play a little strip poker!"

In about an hour Ham comes back. Perched on top of his sombrero is the drummer's hard derby hat, and in his arms he's carrying the rest of the drummer's fancy duds.

"That dude shore can't play strip poker worth fiddlesticks!" Ham says sanctimoniously reshuffling his cold deck. "Look, I won all his clothes. Wonder if they'll fit?"

When Ham comes out of the bedroom, I'll be danged if his own mother would have recognized him. He's shaved close, trimmed and waxed his droopy mustache into a pair of elegant upswept handlebars, and is dressed in the drummer's flashy duds, square-toed button shoes and all! Except that the pants are busting tight across the croup, Ham looks like a fashion plate in a bartender's magazine!

"You ain't aiming to court Widow North in them?" I ask.

"Indirectly," Ham says, his face downright serious. "Egg, I got to have that hundred an' sixty dollars you got saved toward a new saddle."

"Aw, now!" I commence to bellyache.

"Aw, nothin'!" Ham levels. "This is

mighty important. I got to buy some hides in Butte."

"Oh," I nod, tumbling. "You got a hen on the nest! Anything I can do to help?"

"Nope," Ham replies. "This is a job for a feller what's got refinement and business trainin'. Such as me an' these elegant duds. I'm Thaddeus B. Pimplesnickle, what's paying a extra royalty for choice steer hides. I gotta personally look at a lot of hides just to buy a few for a very special tanning job my company has."

"Ham," I warn, "some day your play acting and cock an' bull yarns are going to land you face up in a six-foot hole!"

Ham takes my money, lopes to the station, and boards the night train to Butte. So do I. But from the off side. While Ham sits at his ease on the plush cushions, I freeze to death on a diet of cinders in the blind baggage. I'm going to shadow that numbskull pardner of mine just in case.

At Butte, Ham makes a beeline for the packing house district. He marches right up to the office of the small gyp outfit whose name was on the receipt that Molly North showed us for twenty-five head.

From a doorway across the street, I see Ham introduce himself, and with the proprietor walk to the hide shed, which is right across from me. I shore got a grandstand seat!

The proprietor falls for Ham's big business line, and commences to unpile hides, looking for the extra select grade Ham says his company will pay double for. I see Ham select several with Molly North's Circle N brand.

"I've heard of this North ranch," Ham told me later he said to the packer. "They grow some mighty fine beef."

"Yep," the packer says. "I buy from the son. He brings me in a few now an' then. Fetch a top price from my restaurant trade."

"Too darned bad that boy has that scar on his face," Ham remarks offhand.

"Yeah, ain't it," the packer replies. "I guess he's a plenty hard hombre!"

"I'll have my company send you a check an' shippin' instructions for them hides," Ham concludes, having found out exactly what he wanted. "Good day!"

Just as Ham turns toward the front door, Jake Sutter glancing, over his shoulder furtive as a coyote on the prowl, slips in the back door. From across the street, I see Sutter stop dead in his tracks and gaze intently after Ham's retreating bulk. A puzzled frown gulches his brow.

He bellows something to the packer. The two immediately get into a heated argument. I commence to leave my doorway to eavesdrop better. Then I hunker, freezing motionless in my tracks like a nestin' grouse.

Out of the corner of my eye, I've got a glimpse of someone Injuning up toward the rear of the building. Not Ham. Someone slight. I keep my eyes glued to the space between two cattle cars. Stealthy as a panther stalking a doe, someone is creeping under the cars toward the rear of the hide shed.

I'm rocked back on my heels. The hairpin doing the Apache stalk toward the bickering men in the shed is Paul North. He rises, listens, seems satisfied with what he hears, and slowly palms the butt of his cutter. His thumb hooks over the hammer as he wiggles out of my line of sight.

I drive my boots across the street, hauling hardware.

Too late!

From the shed comes the muffled bellow of a close-held six-gun, and the sudden stomp of fast running. Guns cocked, I barge through the door. Except for the packer the room is empty. A great stain is growing on the front of his white butcher's coat.

I kneel beside him. He's stone dead. Drilled at powder-burning range. Something on the floor attracts my attention. A fringed gauntlet. Like a hawk I pounce on it, stuffing it into my shirt just as the horrified employees charge into the shed.

AT THE inquest I sidehill like a trooper. "No, I didn't see who done it. I just happened to be walking by and heard the shot. Outside of that, I don't know a thing."

For, if Paul North blasted down that meat packer to keep him from telling Jake Sutter what he knew, it's an affair strictly for me an' Ham to settle in our own way.

"Yeah—yeah," Ham nods when I tell him about my part and show him the gauntlet with the beaded Circle N on the cuff. "But why did Jake stampede?"

"Want to brace Paul?"

"Might as well get it over with," Ham says with a grimace of distaste. "This'll just about break his Ma's heart!"

We clump to the door, and are just about to pull the jerk knots on our bronc when Caroline Spellman reins up, and leaps off her lathered bronc pony express.

"There's been a murder," she stammers. "Charley Running Water, the crippled Blackfoot leather worker, has been killed! In cold blood!"

Caroline rides out to Charley's shack with us. Shore enough, poor old Charley is dead among his scattered tools and scraps of leather. Drilled square between the eyes! A cripple, murdered in the coldest of blood! Why?

"How'd you happen to discover him?" Ham asks Caroline.

"It's rather a long story," Caroline relates. "Last Christmas I gave Paul a pair of gauntlets I made myself with a beaded Circle N on the cuffs. He lost one. He was afraid to hurt my feelings, so he had Charley duplicate it. I heard about it in a roundabout way and stopped in to see if Charley had finished with it. I found him dead."

"How long ago did Paul lose this glove?" Ham asks with elaborate carelessness.

"About two weeks ago."

Ham's ears prick forward like a desert jackass scenting sweet water.

"Right glove?"

"Yes," Caroline says eagerly. "You didn't happen to find it, did you?"

"Yep," Ham replies.

"Then let me have it," Caroline requests. "Paul will be pleased, and it'll give me a chance to rib him about being so careless."

"No," Ham grins disarmingly. "You find Paul and have him come to me for the glove."

"I'll lead him in with a ring in his nose," Caroline laughs. "Imagine him being afraid to tell me he lost it, and trying to cover up by having Charley duplicate it!"

"I don't like it a little bit!" I tell Ham as Caroline leaves us on the trail home.

"I do," Ham murmurs. "I—"

Ham pulls up short. Something he's just thought of has just about throwed him.

He tugs thoughtful at his mustache. "I could be that Paul North killed Charley, and Caroline is covering up for him by saying that glove was lost two weeks back! You can never tell what a woman in love will do! With her testimony to back him up, Paul can claim the glove was planted by the packer's murderer."

"But I saw him—"

"Fire the shot?" Ham interrupts. "You did not! So you can't prove a thing! We've got to shake down Jake Sutter! He's our eyewitness! His testimony along with the glove will put Paul's head square in the noose!"

When we get back to the office, Molly North is sitting slumped in my chair. As she raises her seamed and haggard face, I know she's packing an overburden of misery.

"Well," she says, her voice deep and husky with sorrow. "You'd better go out an' pick him up!"

"Who?" Ham asks, playing for information.

"Paul!" Molly's voice trails off as she goes on. "He's done murder. Killed the packer he's been selling my beef to in order to shut him up."

"Who told yuh all this?" Ham questions softly.

"Why, Jake Sutter has suspected Paul of knocking down on me for some time." Molly hangs her head. "Please don't act so innocent. Jake says you have a gauntlet Paul dropped at the scene of the murder!"

"How'd Jake know that?" Ham presses.

"He followed Paul to Butte. While the packer and Paul were quarreling, Jake sneaked up along the railroad tracks and saw everything!"

"Molly," Ham rubs his knuckles reflectively, "this may take us a little time. You just meander back home. But don't be stampeded into paying off Jake with your spread to protect Paul!"

"How—?" Molly whirls. With a spark of her old fire, she goes on, "How'd you know Jake offered to forget everything if I'd deed him the Circle N?"

"I didn't for shore until just now," Ham smiles. "You go home an' string Jake along."

"Can't!" Molly announces. "Jake pulled his freight last night. Left me cold!"

"Did you pay him off?" Ham hog-ties her eye.

"No," Molly says thoughtfully. "Caroline dropped in looking for Paul. Said

she wanted to give him a wigging for trying to pull the wool over her eyes."

"Know what the wool was?" Ham asks.

"No, I don't." Molly shakes her head. "But as Jake escorted Caroline out to her horse, I think he questioned her closely. Right after that, he drew his pay and vamoosed. Caroline bought him off."

"No!" Ham's eyes glitter as he thinks out loud. "He probably learned from her that Charley was making a duplicate of Paul's lost gauntlet, and had had the left one in his possession for over a week as a pattern. In a circumstantial evidence trial, Charley's testimony would go a long way to prove Paul couldn't have been wearing the gauntlets at the time the packer was murdered. That glove was a plant!"

Ham's fist smacks his palm as he finishes, "That's why Charley was murdered night before last! We've got to find Paul, and pronto! Jake won't stop at anything now!"

"If he's not guilty, why did Paul take a slope?" I ask. "He must have a good reason. At least to him!"

AFTER Molly leaves, Ham sits for a while in a brown study. Then he paces the floor, scratching his head like he's got a thriving colony of graybacks. Them rusty wheels in his brain are grinding out something. He's dabbing his twine on every memory he's got of Paul, and dragging the recollection up to the branding fire for a working over.

He flings himself back in the chair, pillowing his head in his arms as he wrastles out a line of reasoning that would make Paul bolt after the murder. Suddenly he jerks up, and jumps from his chair like a firecracker has been exploded under him!

The sudden attack of wisdom sends him into the bedroom. In a moment there's the overpowering odor of mothballs. Ham appears, carrying our angora rodeo chaps, yellow silk shirts, and fancy rodeo boots.

"It's March, not rodeo time!" I say puzzled.

"Not here," Ham clips. "But down Arizona way, they've all ready started the shows. We're headin' out on the night train for the Tucson Frontier Days and Rodeo, which starts next week!"

"You're crazy!" I object. "We can't leave our jobs!"

"Leave nothin'!" Ham commands. "I've got a hunch. While I'm packin' this plunder, you route out Ole Johnson, the County Clerk, an' tell him we've got to have two hundred dollars. No questions asked!"

As we near Tucson, we pocket our badges. At the station, the marshal meets us, and makes us check our cutters like any other waddies. Ham busts right up to the rodeo committee office. Pretending like he wants to ride the wild ones, he asks to look over the entry lists. Shore enough, about half-way down, we find the name of Paul North. "How'd you know?" I ask, right respectful.

"Aw, shucks, that was nothin'," Ham grins. "Paul's said time and again he wanted to be the Champion Bronc Rider of the West. The boy's sorta hipped on the subject. To pile up enough points, I reasoned Paul would have to start early in the season, and ride in practically every big time rodeo."

"Good work, Ham!" I congratulate. "Let's go pick him up."

"Nope!" Ham shakes his head. "We're watchin' an' waitin'!"

"Then what do we do next?"

"Hole up in our hotel room."

At the room, Ham rummages around in his possible sack and fishes out his range glasses. All day long he sits at the window, glasses to his eyes, searching the crowd.

Patient as a hungry Injun in front of a rabbit hole, Ham scrutinizes the milling festival crowd day and night.

"Egg, come quick," Ham motions me to the window on the third day. "Look! My hunch was right! Jake Sutter is in Tucson!"

Jake is slipping along the street, making himself plenty small with his hat brim low over his eyes, and wearing a suit of store clothes. He dodges into a hardware store. In a few minutes he comes out carrying a package.

I follow Ham as he starts for the hardware store at a high lope.

"A feller was just in here an' bought somethin'," Ham says, describing Jake to the clerk.

"So you're going to give the boss's kid something for his birthday too?" the clerk smiles.

"What?" Ham grunts, then catches on.

"Yeah. Shore. But we don't want to duplicate the presents. What did Jake buy?"

"A twenty-two repeating rifle," the clerk replies. "Your friend was mighty sensible too. He bought twenty-two B.B. cartridges instead of shorts or longs for the boy. No danger of the lad hurting anyone with them. They'll just sting to beat the band if he should accidentally hit someone."

Ham thanks the clerk, and buys the mythical boss's son a jackknife. But he's worried. Why has Jake bought that rifle with them pipsqueak cartridges? He paces the floor until the clerk comes up and says the guest in the room below us can't sleep for his back and forth clumping.

"Don't take it so hard, pardner," I say. "The marshal has slick-hipped everybody. Jake can't kill Paul with a cartridge that shoots only a little harder than an air rifle. Get some sleep so's we can enjoy the rodeo. There's going to be some mighty fancy bronc topping tomorrow."

NOW, folks, when the county is paying our expenses, Ham don't hold back none. But when he buys our tickets for the bleachers in the roasting sun, instead of the covered grandstand, I object.

"What you trying to do, get us sunstruck?" I grumble.

But Ham's got some hen on the nest. He don't hear me, or take much interest in the rodeo show. He keeps his eyes glued on the covered grandstand across the arena. When the bucking contests are announced, Ham gets up from his seat and signs me to follow him.

"What's the big idea?" I want to know, protesting like a calf being drug out of a clover pasture. "Paul North rides third. I'd like to see that kid top his bronc."

"You will," Ham nods. "Stick close."

Ham leads me to the back of the grandstand.

"You cheapskate!" I accuse. "You can't sneak into them seats on a bleacher ticket stub!"

But, instead of trying to sneak into the grandstand, Ham commences to climb the ladder that runs to the roof over it! Just before the top, Ham hands me down his hat. Cautiously as a scout spying on an Apache camp, Ham raises his eye over the rim of the flat roof. He ducks down quick, swings over, and motions me to take a look.

I skin up, poke my eye over the roof edge, and jerk back. My jaw hangs slack as a dishrag!

For sprawled out on the front of the roof overlooking the arena is Jake Sutter! In his arms he's got that toylike twenty-two repeating rifle!

The wind brings us the sound of cheering as the second peeler makes his ride. Paul North is up next. We hear the welcoming yells of the crowd as his bronc explodes out of the chute.

Jake Sutter snuggles the toy rifle to his cheek. There's an unnoticed ping as he squeezes off a shot. A cry goes up from the stands. Jake pumps out rapid shots. The crowd is roaring.

Jake's shots are stinging that horse into a frenzy. He's goading it into a white-hot killing rage. The pain crazy bronc will dump Paul in short order. Then—I shudder to think of what the bronc will do to the lad.

Cautiously as a hungry cat stalking a robin, we creep toward the prone foreman, who is pumping out a steady string of shots. The wild excited roar of the crowd drowns out the sound of the little cartridges and helps us.

I jerk a look at the arena. Paul's riding a twisting tornado as the bullet stung berserk bronc shoots its spine in a fiendish spasm of wild-eyed terror. It's murder to let a boy ride such a spine-jolting cayuse. The pick-up men spur out. Jake shifts his rifle, sending his stinging pellets into their mounts. They rear, paw their air in frantic pain, and commence bucking in unmanageable terror.

Ham dives on Jake, his fist piledriving to the foreman's surprised jaw. I kick the rifle from his grasp. Ham runs to the edge of the roof. Paul is putting on a ride. But no mortal man could sit leather on that delirious bullet-spooked bronc.

Paul blows a stirrup. Daylight commences to show between him and the saddle. The cayuse busts in two in a paroxysm of fury. Paul arcs into the air, plowing the dust in a nasty hard spill.

A cry of abject terror rocks the horrified stands. Snorting, wild-eyed with the savage killer instinct of an outlaw, the bullet maddened bronc rears over Paul's prone form. The pick-up men,

fighting their lead-spooked broncs are helpless.

The berserk horse is going to trample Paul into a sodden mass. Jake Sutter has killed the lad as surely as though he'd put a slug in his heart! He knows Molly North would do anything to preserve Paul's good name after the "accident!" Even making us pull in our horns!

Ham kneels at the very edge of the roof. He fumbles at his right boot, pulling out a small blue derringer. His hideout gun! Ham's big hands fold around the gun, as he sits and steadies his elbows on his knees. It's a long shot for a short barreled gun!

I hold my breath, my belly muscles knotting rock tense, and utter a prayer. The little gun barks.

A miss!

Ham steadies, his underlip caught between his teeth as he squeezes off the lower barrel. The rearing killer, its lashing forefeet about to strike Paul, shudders in midair. The bronc staggers, collapses in a quivering heap, then struggles to its feet drunkenly.

"He's only creased!" Ham shouts into the vacuum of silence that follows his shot. "I want that bronc for evidence. Get a line on him!"

I see a loop-building waddy spur out. Then a piledriver slugs me alongside of the head. A burning streak of fire furrows over my skull as I stagger, trip over my uncontrollable clumsy feet, and sprawl on the rough plank roof.

I shake the cobwebs out of my brain. Jake Sutter has come to, grabbed the twenty-two rifle, and creased me with a B.B. pellet.

He pumps a shot at Ham just as my pardner hurls the empty derringer at him, making him miss.

Jake pumps the rifle again. It's empty. Clubbing it, the ramrod rushes Ham. He swings viciously. Ham ducks under the savage blow. His battering shoulder drives into the foreman's middle. Grunting, Sutter jackknifes, reels backwards on his heels. He totters a horrible, frantic, air clutching instant at the brink over the edge.

"Darn," Ham pants heavily, helping me to my feet. "I wanted that hombre alive!"

PAUL is pretty badly hurt. A concussion that keeps him unconscious for three days. Molly hires a special train, grabs Caroline, and burns the trails to Tucson.

Paul comes out of it as though the whole thing has been a bad dream.

"Sure, I saw Jake kill that packer," he tells us as we group around his bed. "And I saw him plant my gauntlet, just as he planted that bill-of-sale for mother to find. Egg, you barged in before I could recover the glove."

"Yuh knew we'd be lookin' for yuh," Ham demands. "Why did yuh pull yore picket pin? Looked powerful bad, son!"

"Yes," Paul agrees, "I realize now I made a very bad mistake. But I just couldn't be detained in Sweetgrass. To win the Bronc Riding Championship, I absolutely had to have the points I could pile up here at Tucson!"

Then Paul grins through his bandages. "You folks didn't know it, but last year I was runner up!"

"That explains where you got that dice game money!" I nod.

"What's this?" Caroline chides. "While we thought you were at college improving your brains, you were sashaying around the rodeo circuits getting them scrambled!"

"He won't any more!" Molly dictates, her voice tough, but there's a mighty proud gleam in her eye. "I'm making Paul our new ramrod! You marry him right off, Caroline. And together we'll keep close hobbles on him!"

"Molly, you wouldn't want to put the same kind of hobbles on me, would yuh?" Ham's moonstruck calf eyes look appealingly at the cattle baroness. "Could save a little dinero. The preacher, most likely, would tie two knots for the price of one!"

"Fiddlesticks, you old goat!" Molly snorts. Then a wide grin spreads over her face as she finishes. "But I'll bet these kids will let you be the best man, Ham!"

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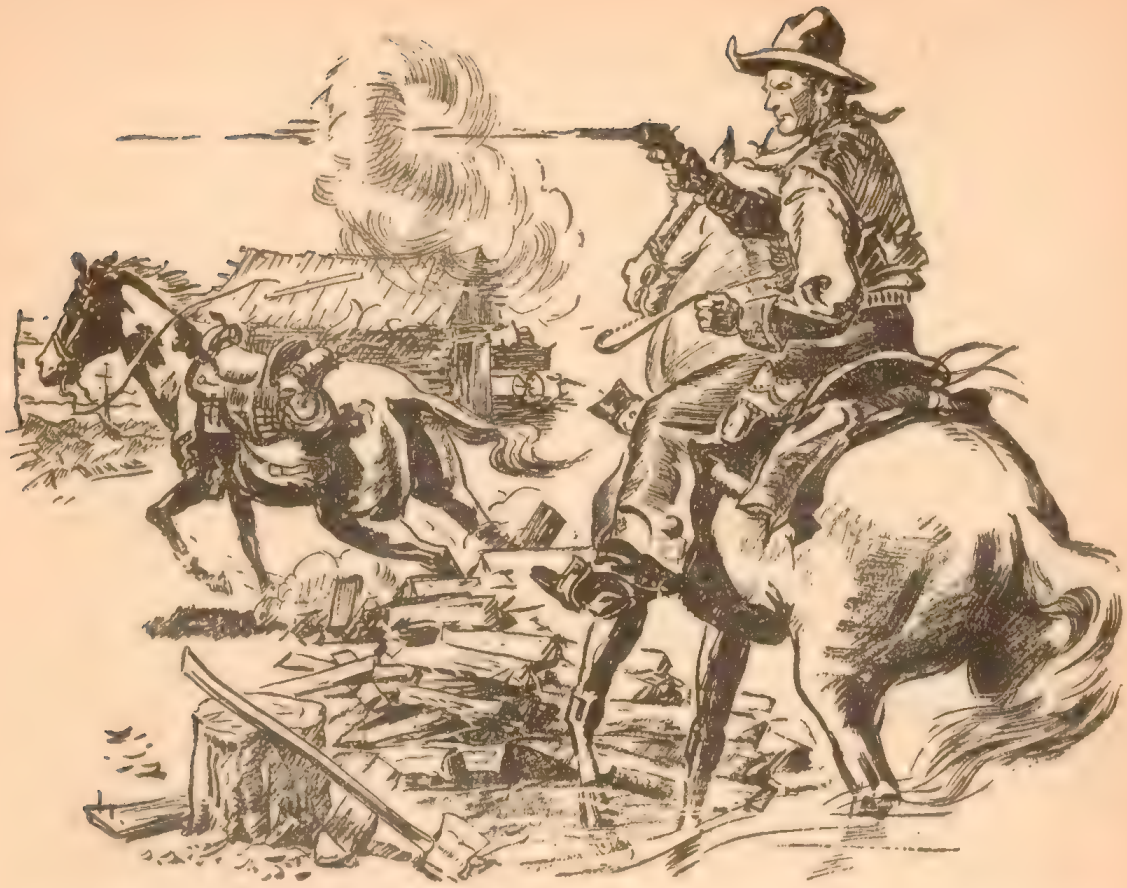
NEXT ISSUE

HAM'S FOXY FUMBLE

Another Uproarious Yarn by ALFRED L. GARRY

A Blue Steele
NOVELET

The Colt roared as Shorty drove a fist to the jaw



THE THIRTEENTH MOON

By TOM GUNN

When Chow Now, the Painted Post cook, is brutally beaten and robbed, Sheriff Blue Steele and Deputy Watts need more than their flaming six-guns to solve the baffling mystery!

CHAPTER I

Rattlesnake Oil

DEPUTY Sheriff "Shorty" Watts was sickly white and the freckles that spattered his homely face were greenish as he returned from an early and unusually hurried supper at Chow Now's. Shorty lurched through the batwing doors of the Painted Post saloon where the evening crowd was just gathering. Thimble Jack was quick to notice the little redhead's pallor. He slid a bottle and whisky glass down the bar. Shorty gulped and shook his head.

"You ain't a drinkin' man, I know that," said the bartender, "but you shore look like you need a bracer. What's wrong?"

Shorty propped elbows on the bar and looked at his reflection in the back-mirror. Doc Crabtree stepped beside the little deputy, frowning with professional concern over the top of his shiny specs.

"You're taking down with something, young feller. Any symptoms?"

The little deputy's shoulders lifted in a shudder as gooseflesh rippled along

his spine. "Oho, chills, eh?" the Doc said briskly. "I'll mix you a prescription. Grippe, likely. Wait—"

"Hold on, Doc," Shorty blurted as the medical man dashed for the stairs leading to his office. "Nuthin' serious ails me. Just a rattlesnake."

"Just a rattlesnake!" Doc Crabtree whooped in alarm. "Nothing serious? Holy hoptoads, where did it strike you?"

Shorty grinned wanly.

"Calm down, Doc. I ain't bit. It—it's the snake Chow Now's got in his kitchen."

"Magpie" Stevens, the gabby old geezer who drove the Painted Post stage, edged in.

"Yuh say that heathen Chinee's got a rattlesnake in his eatin' place?" he yelped.

"Hangin' over his cookstove," nodded Shorty.

"What in heaven's name for?" cried Doc Crabtree.

SHORTY shrugged. From down at the shadowy far end of the bar Sheriff Blue Steele strode forward. The lean, tall lawman was unexcited. A thin smile flicked his mouth corners.

"Chow Now is rendering out snake oil, I reckon," he drawled. "Old Chinese remedy for rheumatism and the like."

"Thunderation!" boomed Judge John Bertram. "Come to think, he had a rattler danglin' from his clothesline once last summer. Remember, Doc? You hollered because it was alongside your best white shirt."

"In summer, snake oil will render out in the hot sun," Steele explained. "Not now, in cold weather. No harm done, I'd say."

"That snake's too close tuh the skillet grub tuh suit me," sighed Shorty.

"It's surprising anything could spoil that appetite of yours, *segundo,*" Steele drawled.

"Snake oil for rheumatism!" Doc Crabtree snorted indignantly. "Just some more Chinee hocus-pocus!"

"Don't be too sure about that," said the sheriff. "There's plenty of genuine savvy mixed up in Chow Now's beliefs."

Doc Crabtree's billygoat beard jutted at a stubborn angle. "Just name one!" he challenged.

Thoughtfulness crept into the sheriff's granite-gray eyes. "I'm thinking about something the old-timer mentioned lately. The thirteenth moon, he called it."

"What's that?"

"The last full moon of our calendar year. Reckon you know that the Chinese go by a moon calendar. Makes their dates fall different than ours. For instance, here it is close to our New Year. Chinese New Year doesn't arrive for a month or so."

"What'd he say about the thirteenth moon?" demanded Judge Bertram.

"Well, Judge, Chow Now calls it the bad moon. Comes halfway between the harvest moon and the planting moon. In China, it's called the hunger moon. And robber or murder moon sometimes, as bandits prowl and depredate at that season."

"Fuddle duddle!" huffed Crabtree.

"I wouldn't say so," Steele mused. "Here in the desert country most trouble comes about the thirteenth moontime, I've noticed."

"By Godfrey, that's right," rumbled Bertram. "In the dead of winter mountain lions roam down out o' the high range to prey on my T Bar T calves."

"And human varmints roam," the sheriff went on. "It being now that travel is easy on the desert, with water at easy intervals. Murder moon, it isn't just superstition after all."

"I'm murderin' that old Chinese if he doesn't get that snake out of there, it being the only eating place we've got," grumbled the Doc.

"Dictionary" Smith, the shy little town handyman, had been an interested listener. Now he spoke up.

"Our Oriental friend got me curious recently by borrowin' my shovel," he said. "Now I understand. He's excavatin' nests of hibernating sidewinders for—"

"More likely he's diggin' a hole under his kitchen floor," guessed Magpie.

"For why?" Steele looked sharply at the grizzled stage driver.

"To bury his savings. Been a month o' Sundays since the ol' fossil has shipped any money up to the Wells Fargo bank at Cottonwood. And he takes in plenty, we all know that."

The sheriff's eyes swept the faces of everyone present. Magpie's words brought a gleam of interest to Bertram's square, florid face. Doc Crabtree, lighting a stogie, sniffed disinterestedly.

Thimble Jack ran a hand slowly over his slick, neatly-parted hair, but with no perceptible change of expression in his sad countenance.

Shorty didn't show any interest at all, his thoughts still clinging to the oil-oozing rattler. There was one other visitor present, a man not often seen in the evening circle at Thimble Jack's place. He was Lute Purdy, up from Circle 7, a small, lonely spread on the Mexican Border. Purdy was a silent sort, with black, brooding eyes in a narrow, scarred face. Nobody knew Purdy

very well. He was a comparative newcomer.

AFTER a moment of silence, Purdy ran a tongue over his thin, hard lips.

"Judge, s'posen we git back tuh the business we talked over," he proposed in his thin, rasping voice. "Is it a deal?"

Bertram's thick, frosty brows screened his bright-blue eyes. "Money talks, Lute," he grunted. "Let's go eat. Comin', Doc?"

"No thanks, John! Not till that old Chinese cleans up his joss-house!"

The crowd broke up. The sheriff of Painted Post returned to the far end of the bar. His somber gaze went to a wall calendar as his hand strayed to a pocket of his calfskin vest for cigarette makings. He twisted shut a smoke and one eyebrow lifted as he lit it. This was the night of a full moon, the thirteenth moon. The bad moon.

As he smoked, a kitten came out of the back-room, arched its back and rubbed against his legs.

He looked down at it, his eyes softening. He picked it up and set it on the bar.

"Set 'em up, bartender," he ordered, playing gently with the kitten as it rolled over on its back and wrestled with his hand.

"I ain't overfond o' cats," Thimble Jack said sourly. "And I don't serve milk."

Doc Crabtree, wrapped in a game of solitaire at a corner card table, growled:

"Magpie fetched it down from Cottonwood. Don't ask me why."

"Tuh ketch mice," said Shorty, who was dawdling by the door, struggling with his returning appetite, uncertain whether to return to tackle his supper again.

"Cats are unsanitary. Full o' microorganisms," Crabtree said.

"We got plenty o' mice up at the jail-office," Shorty added. "How about us adoptin' a cat, Sheriff, huh?"

Steele picked up the bundle of soft fur and tucked it inside his open vest front.

"Then trot over to Chow Now's and rustle up some cat eats, *segundo*," he said.

Shorty vanished. A moment later, Steele's long strides took him up along the loose-planked sidewalk toward the low, adobe-walled jail where he and the little deputy slept. It was an hour past sunset, but the vast, rolling Border country gleamed under a round, brilliant moon that rode high in the cold December sky. The kitten snuggled purringly against him. Steele lit a wall lamp and was adjusting the wick when Shorty appeared.

Shorty set an opened can of something on the sheriff's desk. Steele put the kitten beside it.

"Migosh, look at the little cuss go for it!" Shorty yipped. "Wonder what's in that tin can? There's a Mexican label that says—"

"Looks sort o' like rattlesnake," Steele said off-handedly.

Shorty's face fell and the greenish tinge crept back into his freckles.

"There yuh go!" he sputtered. "Just as I was gittin' hungry agin!"

CHAPTER II

Tin-can Crook

THE chain of small, seemingly - unrelated events and scattered talk at Thimble Jack's place took on sinister significance later that night. The moon's shadows slanted long from the west when Steele, a light sleeper, was aroused by the velvety soft impact of the kitten's feet on the window sill beside his desk.

He opened an eye and peered from under the blankets. He saw the kitten silhouetted sharply against the pane, against the silvery magic of the night. Its ears were alert, its keen senses attentive to something outside. Steele lifted his head from the pillow and listened. Whatever sound there might be was lost in the little deputy's robust snores.

It was cold—so cold that Steele could see his breath. Reluctantly he tossed back his blankets and swung bare feet to the floor. He went to the window and stroked the kitten.

"Want out, Jasper?" he breathed. "If so, I hope this isn't a regular nightly schedule."

But the half-grown animal passively resisted his effort to pick it up. It looked up at his face, mewed softly, then resumed its vigil.

It was almost as light as day outside. The rutted main street, between jail office and Chow Now's shack, was a bright carpet. A wind was rising, lifting little swirls of silvery dust. The thick, bolt-studded jail office door was gripped by the force of a gust. The bolt rattled faintly.

But that wasn't the sound that concerned the kitten. Its nose pressed the glass. Suddenly a weak, wavering light showed inside Chow Now's place. Then, as suddenly, it blinked out. Then, in an interval between Shorty's snores, Steele heard something.

He went to the door, shot back the bolt and opened it a little. The icy draft whipped about him, bringing with it, faintly, so tiny a sound, that Steele barely was sure he had heard it. It was a weak, muffled outcry, a sound of human distress.

Swiftly he thrust the door shut, shot the bolt and hurried into his clothes. From a wall peg back of his desk he took down his cartridge-studded buscadero belt, heavy with holstered Colts—the twin six-guns that had made history and legend in the Border country.

An instant later, with head tilted to a fierce blast of wind, the sheriff crossed the street. Chow Now's door latch clicked at his touch. He opened the door and slithered inside.

"Hullo, old-timer!" he called out. "What's up?"

Nothing but wind sounds answered. He called again. Then he strode forward, past the serving counter and its row of stools. He lifted the gate slab at the end of the counter and went to the doorless opening in the thin partition that shut off the kitchen from the front part of the place.

It was dark in here. Two windows looked to the back, but no moonlight entered because of a shed-roofed area. He struck a match. The head sputtered and reeked sulphurously, then the light took hold. Steele gave a startled exclamation. He stepped to a table, lifted the chimney off of a stand lamp. As he touched match flame to wick he noted that the lamp chimney was warm to his hand.

With the light going, he stooped to the crumpled form beside a ripped-up

Shorty Watts

section of floorboards. A shovel handle stuck out from the bared joists. Loose, freshly-dug dirt indicated a hole. Canned goods were spilled onto a table from a nearly-empty shelf above it. Some had rolled and dropped onto the floor. The place was in general disorder—cupboard doors ajar, drawers open and hurriedly dumped, a cot mattress ripped open and the stuffing scattered.

But all that Steele saw at a glance. His main attention went to Chow Now, breathing raggedly, but unconscious. He was wetly, horribly blood-splattered. Gore oozed from a deep head wound.

The back door swung and grated. A Colt leaped into the sheriff's right hand. He slid it back in holster. It was only the wind. He went outside. Past the roofed area, where a dish towel flapped wildly, he saw sign of the cruel marauder.

Horse tracks in the loose, sandy ground.

The wind was fast erasing them. Out in the open, in the full force of the wind, no doubt they already were obliterated. But recent as those hoofmarks were, to trail them was impossible now.

STEELE returned to the kitchen. He scooped the frail, thin body of the aged Chinese in his arms. The sheriff's rugged face was taut with anger.

"I'll catch up with the hombre that did this, old-timer, and I hope you live to see it," he gritted.

He carried the limp, senseless burden, swerving across the street with the wind hurrying him. In front of Thimble Jack's, he yelled up at an upper story window:

"Wake up, Doc Crabtree! Rouse out!"

He climbed to the platform sidewalk and battered the side of the building with a boot and shouted again. The Doc's sleepy, cranky voice drifted down.

"Who's down there? You, Steele? What in—"

"Grab your black satchel and gallop downstairs," crackled the sheriff. "Make it sudden. It's Chow Now and what's ailing him isn't a case for snake oil."

Steele pushed his way into the saloon. He laid his Chinese friend on the bar, then vaulted onto it to light the hanging kerosene lamp above it.

Before many minutes the circle of light was an arena of emergency surgery. Doc Crabtree was tousled and bleary-eyed but his skilled hands were sure and steady.

Sheriff Blue Steele

"Kicked and beaten to a pulp," he muttered savagely. "Broken collar bone, skull fracture, face and scalp a mass of cuts and bruises."

"What are his chances?"

Doc Crabtree shrugged. "About fifty-fifty. Chow Now, he's no spring chicken any more."

Never had the sheriff felt a stronger urge to find a miscreant and bring him to justice. First of all, Chow Now was a good friend. That the cruel attack had occurred directly across from the jail was a bold challenge. And it was no small matter that Painted Post's only eating place was out of service. The town could have dispensed with almost anybody else more conveniently. Everybody had boarded at Chow Now's.

"How long before he can talk?" Steele asked.

"Hours, maybe days. Depends on whether there's a brain concussion. It's going to take a heap of doctoring and joss sticks to keep him from going to—wherever dead Chinese go."

"If he goes, it's to the same place the best of us go, Doc."

"I know that. Chow Now was that kind—big-hearted, honest, hard-working, cheerful. Arizona Territory needs the likes of him. Hey you, Dictionary, isn't that water hot yet, blast your lazy hide?"

The handyman, Thimble Jack and Magpie, all of whom slept upstairs, were at hand now, making fumbling efforts to help.

It seemed significant to the sheriff that the robbery should have followed so closely on the talk in the saloon the night before, when Magpie hinted that Chow Now had a hoard of money on his premises. Only two persons who had heard that talk were absent now. They were Judge Bertram and Lute Purdy.

"What time," Steele asked, "did the judge light out?"

He started back to T Bar T about ten-thirty," Thimble Jack answered.

"And Purdy?"

"They left together. They were in confab over some deal. Seems I heerd a grazing lease mentioned."

Steele pondered on that. Strange that Circle 7 should be after grass, T Bar T grass. Circle 7 had more grass than cows.

"I'll be over at the restaurant," he told Doc Crabtree with sudden decision. "If the old-timer comes to, send for me sudden."

Doc Crabtree nodded as he moistened a swab in strong-smelling antiseptic.

Back in Chow Now's kitchen, Steele started a systematic search for clues. It was three in the morning now. The attack had taken place within the past hour. If he could only find something to point to the identity of Chow Now's assailant.

But his keenest scrutiny failed to reveal a single clue—nothing but those blurred horsetracks in back of the open shed. His attention finally centered on the canned goods and other supplies spilled from the shelf above the kitchen table.

Had the food stock been searched—or looted?

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CHAPTER III

A Cat Rides

HE MADE swift inventory of the items he saw and reached the conclusion that the disorder resulted from a search of the premises. At least, plenty of articles were left that a robber in want of food would have taken.

He crossed to the jail, wakened Shorty and tersely told him the bad news. He sat on the edge of his desk as he did so, rolling a cigarette. The kitten leaped to his knee. Licking the brown paper quirly shut, Steele placed it to his lips and ruffled the soft, tortoise-shell fur as the kitten went to the now-empty can and sniffed it hungrily, then looked appealingly at him.

For the first time Steele took notice of the label on the small, round can. It was a simple label in Spanish:

LONGUSTA
Gomez Hermanos
Hermosillo, Sonora

"Sort of fancy eatin' for a cat, *segundo*," he mused.

"Chow Now had a-plenty of it, Sheriff."

"Plenty of it? Where?" About to light up his smoke, Steele went suddenly attentive.

"On that kitchen shelf. With a heap of other tin-can grub."

The sheriff's eyes glinted with eagerness.

"Two-three dozen cans like this one," the little deputy added. "Looks like Jasper, here, is going tuh fare better'n the rest of us, now that Chow Now's laid up. We'll go hungry—"

"Dictionary can cook some."

But operation of the eating place wasn't the thought that surged into the sheriff's probing mind. The significant thing was that in his search of Chow Now's kitchen, he had not found a solitary can marked "LONGUSTA." He tossed away his unlighted cigarette and got to his feet.

"Saddle up, *segundo*, and bring the

horses down to Thimble Jack's, pronto."

"Where we ridin', Sheriff?" The redhead tugged on a boot and stamped into it.

"To Circle Seven, fast."

"Then I better git another can for Jasper, here, tuh feed on while we're—"

"Skip it," Steele said hurriedly.

He scooped up the kitten and thrust it inside his vest again and was off for Thimble Jack's place. He took with him the empty can.

Magpie and Dictionary were carrying Chow Now upstairs on an improvised stretcher. At Steele's unspoken query, Doc Crabtree shook his head.

"Not conscious yet. I'll keep close watch, in case he comes to and can tell what happened. Needs constant attendance, that's why I want him here, near me."

Steele thrust the "LONGUSTA" can in the Doc's hands.

"Show him this," he said.

Crabtree gave him a puzzled look, sniffed the can and made a wry face. "Smells fishy. What's the idea?"

"Don't know myownself, not yet," was the mystifying answer.

Chow Now was bedded down on Dictionary's cot. Shorty arrived. Steele met him at the hitchrail in front of the saloon and mounted his sleek steel-dust gelding. He started along a trail that led southwest out of town and Shorty spurred his black-and-white pinto after him.

THEY had loped two miles or farther before they came abreast on a stretch where the trail widened on a mesquite flat. It was moon-down now, the first faint streaks of daylight in the eastern sky. In the half-light Shorty saw the sheriff's right arm cradling a small bulge inside his calfskin vest.

"Migosh, yuh brung our cat along!" he gusted. "I figgered yuh was leavin' it at Thimble Jack's."

"Good little traveler, Jasper is," Steele replied placidly.

"Huh, yuh're fonder o' pets than I figgered. Be sort of amusin' tuh some folks tuh see the famous two-gun sheriff packin' a cat around with him."

"Reckon so?"

The sheriff kneed the gelding into a lope again and, as the daylight grew, scanned the trail for a sign. Hoofprints showed, but there was no telling how recent they were. The desert had got in its work, wherever the ground was soft enough to hold an imprint.

It was a long twelve miles to Circle Seven and by hard riding they made it by sunup. Purdy's home spread was situated in a long, narrow swale that extended from a spring bench or *ciénega* where small, scattered bands of cattle grazed, tails to the wind. A flat streamer of smoke blew from the cookshack stovepipe.

"Prospects for breakfast look purty good," Shorty remarked hungrily.

They dropped rein in the dooryard and as they swung from leather Lute Purdy, looking frowsy as though he had just gotten up, stepped out onto the porch of the ramshackle ranchhouse. His black eyes rounded and a half-smile touched his brooding face just for an instant, then went, leaving curiosity and a trace of suspicion.

"What brings you so early?" he demanded, jumping from the porch and trudging toward the cookshack doorway.

"Kin tell yuh better over a red-hot cup o' cawfee," chirped Shorty, following Purdy. "We ain't passin' up any meals, now that—"

He broke off at a sharp nudge from the sheriff. As they went inside, Steele, in a barely audible undertone, told him:

"Let me break the news, *segundo*."

They exchanged greetings with three Circle 7 punchers who settled themselves around a long oilcloth-covered table as Purdy took his position at the head of it. The Circle 7 cook, Frenchy, set places for the guests with a greater show of hospitality than had Purdy.

Steele motioned toward an opened can of condensed milk. The cook misunderstood the gesture.

" 'Scuse me, Shariff. You always takum black, bald-headed, I remembair," he apologized, handing him a cup.

"Still do. Got a saucer, Frenchy?"

Frenchy whisked one down from a shelf. He watched wonderingly while Steele poured milk into it, then set it on the bench beside him. Then they all stared as the sheriff produced the kitten.

"There are three of us now, Frenchy," Steele said as Jasper bunched himself by the saucer and lapped greedily.

"Well, that's a hot one!" Purdy broke out with a loud, jeering laugh. "Tough-

est lawman in the Territory goes la-de-da over a cat! Ho, ho!"

Shorty reddened and squirmed. "See, Sheriff, it's like I told yuh!" he fumed.

Steele leaned forward on an elbow, gray eyes steady and unmoved on Purdy's face.

"Pull in late from town, Lute?" he asked.

The other's boisterous mirth chopped off. "Around midnight. Why?"

If Purdy could prove that, his innocence was established.

"Meet up with anybody along the trail?"

"No. Just what you drivin' at, Steele?" he demanded gruffly. "Who yuh lookin' for?"

EVERYONE in the cookshack waited intently for Steele's reply It came after a deliberate pause.

"For the hombre that beat and robbed Chow Now, sometime *after* midnight."

Lute Purdy's face darkened belligerently. "That's sort of pointed, Steele. Insinuatin' I'm yore thief?"

"As a matter of routine, Lute, I'm asking everybody who was at Thimble Jack's last evening to furnish an alibi."

"Yeah? I bet ten bucks you didn't ask Judge Bertram for an alibi!"

"I'll bet he does!" flared Shorty. "I also bet the judge has a better alibi than you've got, so far!"

"I hear de boss come," spoke up Frenchy as he dished out bacon and eggs. "By my bunk is alarm clock. In moonlight I see time. Leetle past twelve, she say, about twenty meenute."

"Does that hold you, Steele?" sneered Purdy.

"Thanks, Frenchy," Steele said. "But a man gets a clock's hands switched sometimes, when he's only half-awake. Takes the hour hand for the minute hand."

Purdy's knife and fork clattered to the table as he half rose to his feet, his face clouded with anger.

"Meanin' you claim it was around four when I got back instead o' midnight or shortly thereafter?" he blazed.

"Keep your shirt on, Lute," Steele warned him. "My job is to find who beat and robbed Chow Now. Your job is to help by giving straight answers to straight questions."

"I pick op clock, look good," vowed Frenchy. "Because I teenk mebbe alarm no go off, I oversleep. Twenty meenute after twelve she say. Dat's de troot, Shariff. By Gar, Chow Now gude faller, vair' sorry he in trobble. Wot happen to heem?"

That was the first expression of curiosity about the robbery. Strange, Steele reflected, that Lute Purdy had not asked the question. The Circle 7 boss had sullenly returned to eating, eyes on his plate.

The sheriff gave a terse account, most of it a description of Chow Now's grave condition. Shorty could hardly wait until they left Circle 7 to burst out with a question:

"How come yuh didn't tell how Jasper woke yuh up, Sheriff? That was what told yuh when it happened."

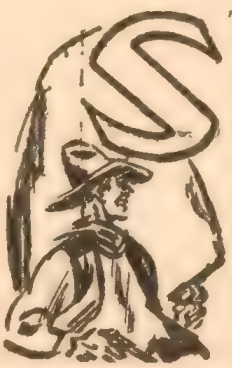
"Reckon Lute would o'been interested, *segundo?*"

"Not specially. But it'd help explain why yuh've took to cats so sudden." Shorty was still smarting from Purdy's ridicule.

Though he did not know it yet, Steele had omitted mentioning something else. It was the matter of the missing supply of canned "longusta" from the restaurant kitchen shelf.

CHAPTER IV

Jasper Finds a Clue



STEELE and Shorty, returning to Painted Post, made a discovery they had missed in their before-dawn ride down to Purdy's spread. It was a sign of sheep—a recently-trampled stretch of ground alongside the Circle 7 trail.

"A small band headed south circled back along about here," Steele observed.

"Huh! Funny thing Lute didn't mention it. He was bound tuh know."

"Could be he was shy on the subject," Steele commented wryly.

"That's puttin' it mildly," sputtered Shorty., "Sheep is everybody's business on cattle range."

"No argument about that, *segundo.* We'll ask Judge Bertram what he knows."

"What makes yuh think the judge

knows there's sheep around?"

"My guess is, that was what he and Lute Purdy were confabbing about. We'll see."

Bertram was in town when they got there. He was in an explosive state of excitement over the Chow Now robbery.

"Got any facts to go on yet?" he demanded of the sheriff.

"Mighty little, Judge."

"By Godfrey, the low-down hyena that done this thing has to be caught!"

"Reckon I feel about as strongly about it as anybody, Judge," Steele said grimly. "And for several reasons. One being that I value that old Chinese as a true friend. How is he?"

"Still unconscious, the Doc says."

They were at Thimble Jack's bar. Bertram evidently had reached there only a few moments before the lawmen's return. For now he drew a billfold from a jacket pocket and took a sealed envelope from it.

"Put it in the mailbag, Jack," he said. "For Magpie to take on his next up-trip to Cottonwood, and deposit with Wells Fargo for me."

Steele drew the kitten from under his vest, where it was curled, comfortably asleep. On the bar it yawned and stretched itself. All at once, then, it sniffed and went to Bertram's envelope.

There was something in there of definite cat-interest. Sniffing with growing eagerness, Jasper raked a claw over it.

"Hey, that ain't catnip!" grunted the judge, reaching to brush the curious kitten aside.

Steele seized Bertram's arm. "Hold on, Judge."

Bertram gave the sheriff a befuddled look. Jasper pawed the envelope over and started to chew at a corner. Bertram threw off Steele's restraining touch.

"I ain't standin' here and lettin' a blamed cat chaw up two hundred in cash!" he objected vigorously. "What's got into you, anyhow, Sheriff? Totin' a cat around, like an old maid?"

Steele gently drew the kitten away from the attraction. "Mind tellin' me where that money came from, Judge?" he inquired.

His voice sounded casual. But Bertram sensed a serious purpose in it. His brusqueness left him, leaving a vague guilt on his open countenance.

"You got to know, so I might as well explain right now," he grumbled. "It—it's sheep money."

"By gravy, yuh was right, Sheriff!" chirped Shorty.

"Right about what?" blared Bertram.

"We seen a sheep trail down Circle Seven way. The sheriff, he let on as how you—"

"Lute Purdy got me into it," Bertram growled uncomfortably. "It was like this—a Tonto basin sheepman had wrote, asking if he could graze a few hundred head o' ewes over lambing season."

"On Circle Seven?" asked Steele.

"Yes. You know how it is. Sheep outfits need early grass and mild winters for lambing. On green feed, sheep can go a long time without water. Don't interfere with cattle in close-in grazing around waterholes."

AS BERTRAM hesitated, Blue Steele remarked, "That's correct."

"Trouble is, this has been a dry winter so far. The grass hasn't started down on Purdy's back ranges. He couldn't take care of his sheepman, so talked me into leasin' a piece of T Bar T for couple months. Until the Tonto sheepman can head back for the high country, which is under snow now."

"So the two hundred there is the lease money?"

"Thunderation, yes!" Bertram boomed irritably. "The way it's come out, I look like a kid caught in a jam closet. But it was only the Smoketree ground that I leased. I don't graze that salt grass sink much anyhow. If it's okay with T Bar T, nobody else has call to object."

"No, Judge. Naturally not. Smoketree is a long way from any Indian County cattle outfit. No harm and an easy way to pick up a coupla hundred. This sheepman, who is he?"

"Old friend of Frenchy, Lute's cook. A Basque named Pete Marco."

"So that's it!"

"That's what?"

"Why this Marco got in touch with Lute Purdy."

"Seems thataway," grunted Bertram. "But let's git back to this outrage some miscreant committed under your nose last night."

"Early this morning, to be exact. Jasper, here, got onto it first."

"That why you've cottoned onto the little yowler? Aim to train it as sort of a watchdog?"

Bertram's heavy attempt at humor went flat with Steele's serious answer: "More of a bloodhound."

"Where's Dictionary?" Shorty interrupted.

"Been appointed official grub-spoiler, pro tem," Bertram told him without enthusiasm.

"So I hoped," Shorty said, starting for the door. "That Circle Seven breakfast didn't set so good with me. I'm going across and sample Dictionary's brand o' pizen."

"While you're at it, feed Jasper and the horses," directed Steele. "But don't unsaddle."

"Where we head next?"

"Smoketree."

"No need for you to ride herd on Pete Marco," objected Bertram. "You got a more important duty right now, or should have. Thunderation, Marco hasn't got even a full-sized band. Only three-four hundred head instead of a usual fifteen hundred or so."

"All the more interesting to get acquainted," Steele said. "Marco must be a smart hombre to make it pay to drive a split band for such far-off lambing ground. Good two hundred miles, Tonto basin."

Steele went upstairs then. He found Doc Crabtree in a haze of stogie smoke beside his patient's cot.

"He's restless, which is to be expected," the doctor reported. "Mutters some, which is natural also in a concussion case."

"Catch anything he says?"

"Chinese is clean out o' my line."

"One word might be a big help. One word or a name."

"Well," the Doc said testily, "he keeps repeating something that sounds like 'long goose'. Cantonese, I expect."

"Longusta! That's not Cantonese." The sheriff's eyes glinted like ore-specked granite.

"What is it?"

"*Tincanese,*" Steele flung over a shoulder as he left and returned downstairs, leaving Crabtree blinking at his strange answer.

Steele found Magpie Stevens up at the corral, above the jail, mending harness. It was a lay-over day for the stage driver. The sheriff got to the point directly.

"Magpie, you talk with a heap of folks in your comings and goings."

The old stage driver took a pinch of fine-cut from a crumpled package in his hip pocket and thrust it into his gap-toothed mouth.

"Don't crave to be unsociable."

The truth was, Magpie spread news and rumor faster than a newspaper. He was celebrated for his gab.

"Recollect mentioning Chow Now lately?"

"Who to?"

"Anybody."

"Well, I could have," was the wary answer.

STEELE faced him, thumbs hooked in his heavy buscadero belt, feet spread wide.

"Come on, Magpie. I don't want to choke it out of you. What I'm after is this—what you spilled last night in Thimble Jack's about Chow Now not shipping out any money lately—did you gossip about that anywhere else?"

Magpie let down the bars with unexpected promptness. "Sure did!"

"Where? Who?"

"Right here. Judge Bertram."

It hit Steele between the eyes.

"Fact is, the Judge was fixin' to put the touch on Chow Now."

"The touch? What do you mean?"

"A loan. Tain't news to yuh that Bertram's been hard up lately, is it? Held over a heap o' fall beef on account o' low prices. Then this dry season don't look so good for spring shipping. The judge, he's cattle-poor."

Cattle-poor. That expressed it. Being cattle-poor, two hundred in sheep money looked good to Bertram, Steele reasoned swiftly. There was another thought, an ugly one.

Judge Bertram, panting from exertion, barged into sight. He scrambled through the gate bars and crossed the corral at a rapid limp.

"Good Godfrey, Steele!" he croaked hoarsely as he came in earshot. "Just now occurred to me how peculiar it looks, me havin' sudden money."

"Some folks might connect it to the robbery, all right," Magpie stated with more candor than tact.

"And to explain that I got it by leasing range to a sheepman would be about as hard on my reputation," cried Bertram.

"Far's the robbery is concerned, I reckon you have an alibi," Steele said

in a confident tone.

"That's the heck of it," groaned Bertram. "I haven't any more alibi than a jackrabbit!"

"Didn't you return to T Bar T last night?"

"No, by Godfrey!" Bertram admitted miserably.

"You can explain that easy enough, I'd say."

"I went to the sheep camp. Fine explanation that'd be."

"The sheep camp? Why?"

"To collect that two hundred."

"What was the big rush?"

"I needed that money bad. It was bright moonlight—the thirteenth moon, like you say—so a night ride was easy."

"Riding to Smoketree took you past T Bar T, didn't it?"

"Marco ain't at Smoketree, not yet. He's movin' up from Circle Seven. He was camped in the Sawtooth foothills last night. There's where Lute Purdy took me."

So Bertram left town with Purdy. Everything the judge said was getting him involved deeper. Steele was alarmed that Indian County's leading citizen, his staunchest friend, should be so closely linked with the shameful assault on helpless old Chow Now.

"In a showdown, Lute Purdy could alibi you."

"But he can't! Marco wasn't in camp! His sheepdogs were on watch over the bedded-down band. We looked around, waited a spell, then Lute guessed mebbe Marco had rode down to Circle Seven to visit Frenchy. So he headed for home and left me there!"

"What time?"

Bertram ran an unsteady hand over his sandpapery jowl. "Hour or so after midnight, I'd say."

"Did he find Marco at Circle Seven?"

"Marco said no. They must o' crossed trails on the way."

"What time did Marco get back to the sheep camp?"

"Nearly morning, it was. Good while after Lute left."

Magpie was drinking it all in. Steele was rankled that these damaging admissions were uttered in his hearing. He turned severely on the gaping stage driver.

"I think I'll lock you up for a spell, Magpie," he declared.

Magpie went up in the air. "Lock *me* up!" he yowled. "What in tarnation for?"

"To keep you from blabbing this all over southern Arizona."

Magpie, in shocked indignation, held up a hand as though making a solemn oath.

"If I ever mention so much as a word, I hope to choke!" he vowed righteously.

Just then, in his agitation, he did choke. On the wad of finecut.

"You can't lock him up—of all people," Bertram said. "He's got to git in to Cottonwood pronto with that money. To cover a—an overdraft in my Wells Fargo account."

CHAPTER V

The Longusta Trail

JASPER was about convinced that he had made a bad mistake in choosing Blue Steele as the main arbiter of his destiny. The lean, quiet sheriff was gentle, kind and fed him. But he was proving to be too restless to please ease-loving feline nature.

The first night in his new home at the jail-office, just as Jasper was getting used to the place, this strange Steele person had snatched him up, tucked him inside the calfskin vest and dashed off in the darkness.

It was warm and snug in there, but the jolting of horseback travel wasn't pleasant for the half-grown tortoiseshell kitten. It was only his confidence in Steele that made him endure that first trip to Circle 7 and back without protest.

But now they were starting out again. Another horseback ride was one too many for Jasper. He tried to scramble out. Soon after they left town, a little after noon, he succeeded. He jumped down from the loping gelding and ran back-trail.

But he could find no hiding place in the sparse desert growth as Steele and Shorty pursued him. So they captured him. Patiently, Jasper awaited a better opportunity for escape. His opinion about travel was positive for all his passive resignation. For no mere hu-

man ever changed a cat's mind.

As they retraced their early *pasear* along Circle 7 trail, Shorty caught up with developments that had occurred while he was wangling something to eat out of Dictionary.

It pleased Shorty that Steele confided in him more than he had in times past. But he wasn't pleased by the turn of events.

"So Frenchy lied about hearin' Lute Purdy return tuh Circle Seven a little past midnight, huh, Sheriff?" fumed the little deputy. "Seems yuh can't take nobody's word for nuthin'."

"Takes some people more'n twenty-seven years to find that out," Steele reported wryly.

"That leads on tuh something more important," Shorty continued. "After leavin' the judge at the sheep camp, Lute havin' been told that Chinese eat peculiar things such as birds' nests, shark fins—even rats. Longusta ain't Chinese for rats, I hope!"

"The word isn't Chinese at all. It's Mexican for lobster, which is plentiful down Gulf of California way. From the label, it seems that this delicacy is canned at Hermosillo. Somehow the old boy got hold of a supply of it. Jasper went for it, naturally enough, as cats dote on fish or any sea-food. He was hollerin' for more when he heard those trouble sounds across the street. Well, when you told me that Chow Now had a lot of canned longusta last night, I'd noticed there wasn't any of it left on that ransacked food shelf."

SHORTY'S face brightened. "I get it now, Sheriff! Yuh figgered that

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could o' tootled back tuh town tuh beat and rob Chow Now."

"Plenty possible, *segundo*," Steele nodded somberly.

"Trouble is, we ain't really sure there was a robbery."

"Right again. We have no actual evidence to that effect. Not until the old boy talks."

"If and when. Tell me something else, Sheriff. I didn't catch ontuh that play over the judge's sheep money. What for did you encourage Jasper tuh play with it and hold off the judge?"

Steele frowned pensively, taking a little time to frame an explanation.

"I had a theory, *segundo*. Hate to admit it, but seems as though it failed. It all had to do with our new special deputy, here."

"Jasper, huh?" Shorty brightened with relief. "Migosh, I'm glad tuh hear yuh had a good reason for packin' a cat around with us. But I still don't savvy."

"The whole thing started with that can of longusta Chow Now gave you to feed Jasper."

"Longusta—what is it, Sheriff?"

"Thought you knew."

"I know Chow Now fed us some mysterious, fancy grub on special occasions. It always tasted mighty good. But I was skeered tuh ask what any of it was, whoever stole it and opened a can would have the scent on his fingers."

"Correct, *segundo*. So when Jasper got interested in that sheep money, I rightaway thought he'd found a clue."

"Creation, looks like he did. S'posen Marco is the guilty party. The judge got the money from Marco, so—"

Steele shook his head gloomily. "That's where Jasper got us off the track, as it looks now. What he smelled was—sheep."

"How come yuh're so sure o' that?"

"I'm not sure, not yet. But mutton is a high-powered smell and it clings to anything that a sheepman handles. Jasper, he just didn't go for it like he goes for longusta. I checked on that by showing him that empty longusta can again, with the fishy smell on it. He talked right up then, loud and insistent."

Shorty gave a despairing gesture. "Then what for we danglin' down Circle Seven way again? Just for the satisfaction o' callin' Frenchy a liar?"

There came just then an especially powerful gust. Tilting his head to the wind, Steele chose to make it an excuse for not replying. He lapsed into his old-time silence.

They talked no more. The desert wind plucked and tore at them. It was more than a weather element in the

Border country. The desert wind was a physical substance as much as the rugged, rolling land, the power of the sun and the rugged, distant mountains. It was a force in human affairs and swayed the moods and formed the actions of men, a monotony that tried their spirits. In dry seasons such as this, the wind blew for weeks at a time. Between the looming Sawtooths and the isolated Sonora ranges below the international boundary was a corridor where nothing hindered its scouring sweep.

At last the ramshackle clutter that was Circle 7 home spread loomed ahead and Shorty wondered at the sheriff's next move. He braced himself to back up that move if the party got rough.

The little redhead hankered for action, excitement, change. It didn't seem that thinking and shuttling along Circle 7 trail were getting them anywhere. So he felt a lift of spirits when the sheriff reined the gelding sharply eastward into a long wash that led to the foothill flank of the Sawtooths.

"Where now, the sheep camp?" he sang out.

"A looksee isn't much out of our way, *segundo*. Let's see what Marco has to say about last night before we tackle Lute Purdy again."

"Okay, Sheriff. But, for once, I'm hopin' we ain't invited to eat. I just ain't a sheep-eater."

"Don't fret yourself about that. But a size-up of Marco's chuck supply would be a good job for you while I confab with him."

"Meanin', look for tin-can longusta, huh, Sheriff?"

"That's the general idea."

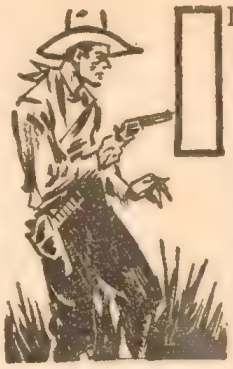
They came suddenly onto the sheep, in a pocket at the head of the wash, protected from the full force of the wind. On a slope overlooking the bare, trampled bedding ground was a tent, the same dirty-gray as the dusty-fleeced ewes. The toneless chorus of sheep voices came and went with the wind. A china-eyed sheepdog, about the color of Jasper, bounded out with much barking. Two other dogs ran out and added to the din.

Shorty pressed clenched knuckles to the side of his head and cast his eyes heavenward.

"Provin' why sheepherders all go loco," he complained. "I'd sooner visit a boiler factory."

CHAPTER VI

A Fighting Finish



INSIDE Steele's vest was a frightened stir. He felt the prick of Jasper's claws as the kitten made a ladder of his ribs. Even at Steele's touch and consoling words, Jasper's violent struggles increased. The dogs were making tumult around the horses.

The commotion spread to the sheep. Their bleating became louder. They started to scatter and run. The tent flaps were hurled open, and a rifle barrel poked out, behind it the face and shoulders of a man with bristly black hair and beard. He yelled something that neither Steele nor Shorty could understand in all the hullabaloo.

They rode on toward the tent. Then the rifle cracked. Jasper really went into action now, as a bullet pierced the calfskin vest.

That neither the sheriff nor Jasper was hit was a miracle.

Steele went for a Colt as the man in the tent levered another load into the rifle chamber. But he had to abandon the draw to prevent Jasper from wriggling free and leaping down—at the mercy of the dogs. With admirable presence of mind, Shorty saw the sheriff's difficulty and spurred the pinto ahead, crossing in front of Steele, putting himself between him and the menacing rifle. The little deputy slapped out his .45 and raced for the tent.

"Drop it, Marco!" he shrilled. "Drop it, yuh lobo, before I blow yuh clean through that danged tent!"

It was a magnificent, daring bluff—and it worked. The crouched man's weapon sagged and slid from his hands, which he raised level with his bushy, glowering face.

"Me no Marco," he bawled.

The little redhead kept him covered as the pinto reared to a halt.

"Crawl out o' yore hole, yuh sheep louse," he crackled angrily. "Yuh're in trouble, whoever yuh are."

The sheriff's steeldust gelding swept up beside the pinto. "We're the law,

hombre!" he sang out. "Come on, show yourself!"

The sheepherder suddenly went meek and came out into the open, eyes glued on the silver badge on Steele's vest. He motioned the dogs away.

"*Yo siento!*" he yammered. "Me sorry. I teenk you cowboys make trobble."

"Who are you?" Steele shot at him.

"Me Zabalondo. Me work for Pete Marco. Sorry, teenk you—"

"Where's Pete?"

The sheepherder flapped a thick, hairy hand in a general southward direction.

"Circle Seven?"

"*Si, senor.*"

Steele rode in closer. The dogs were away, rounding up the scared, scattered sheep. Jasper's struggles had abated.

"And where were you last night, Zabalondo?"

The sheepherder looked dully at him, shaking his head. "No savvy," he muttered.

"You savvy plenty, hombre! Odd thing, you and Pete Marco both leavin' your sheep! Now talk up—were you with Pete last night?"

Zabalondo's brushy face opened in what was intended to be a placating grin. He waved a hand toward the Sawtooths.

"Look for spring. Sheep need water, senor."

"At night you go hunting water? Are you lying, Zabalondo?"

The sheepherder looked blankly innocent. "Plenty good moonlight. Me find spring, awright."

"Then why ain't yuh movin' yore woolies ontuh it?" barked Shorty.

"Me wait for Pete."

"Take a look around the place, *segundo*," Steele said.

Shorty slid from saddle, brushed past Zabalondo and ducked into the tent. It billowed and bucked with the wind that eddied in the hollow. He made a rough exploration and came out.

"Just the usual, Sheriff," he reported. "No sign of—of what we're lookin' for. And smelly—migosh! Even Jasper couldn't nose out a barrel o' herring in there!"

"C'mon, then. Don't let's waste time, with this herder."

"But, Sheriff, he cracked down on you. He ought tuh be learned a lesson."

"First things first, *segundo*."

"The fishy thing around here is his story, about him and Marco both leavin' the sheep same time."

"That's right. Sheepmen wouldn't do that—only for an urgent reason. Get in leather. Let's travel and take up Zabalondo's gun manners later."

GRUMBLING, Shorty mounted. They dusted back to Circle 7 trail and proceeded toward Lute Purdy's spread. Before they reached the ranch *ciénega*, they sighted two riders moving up-trail. Steele's stony eyes glinted with satisfaction.

"Here's where we thresh it out with Lute—and Pete Marco," he said.

In a few minutes the four of them met, head on. Without a greeting, without even a sign of recognition, Lute Purdy stopped and faced Steele. The granite-hard eyes of the sheriff bored into Purdy's swarthy face.

"Start talking, Lute," Steele ordered. "Your alibi is shot full of holes—by Judge Bertram himself. Why did you two-tongue me about the time you got back to Circle Seven?"

"Sure, I lied," Purdy retorted coolly. "Why? On account of the judge. He was in a ticklish spot and I'd got him into it. I even put on a little, actin' sore about your questions."

"You went out on a limb on the judge's account, is that it?"

"Wouldn't you? I'd do it again. That's the truth, Steele. No need to hold back, now that you've got it straight from him. I didn't get back to Circle Seven till a little while before you showed up."

"And you left the judge at the sheep camp?"

"That's what."

"How come Frenchy lied too? Yuh put him up to it?" demanded Shorty.

"Ask him about that."

Steele's eyes flicked to Purdy's companion, a short, heavy-featured man with the broad face and prominent cheek bones typical of his Basque blood.

"You, Marco. What kept you so long last night at Circle Seven?"

"I go see my frien', Frenchy."

"Mighty important social event to make you and Zabalondo leave your sheep untended most o' the night."

"Zabo think I come back early, like I promised."

"What kept you?"

Marco looked uncertainly at Purdy.

"Go ahead, tell him, Pete," Purdy said. "Give it to him straight."

"Frenchy gone," the sheepman said hesitantly. "I wait."

"It was a matter of business, then?"

Marco slanted another look at Purdy, who nodded.

"Come clean, Pete," Purdy said. "Spill the works."

"I go borrow money from Frenchy. Need cash quick for grass, water, lamb-time."

"You get it?"

"No. Not last night. Frenchy say, come back. So today I—"

"But you had two hundred to pay Judge Bertram last night. Where'd you get it?"

"I'll give you the straight of that, Steele," spoke up Purdy. "I dug up the two hundred and gave it to Pete here to hand to the judge. But I didn't want the judge to know that, so I told Pete to say we hadn't met. I'm askin' you not to tell him, either. He's a proud old cuss, Bertram is. No use humiliatin' him. Pete came back to Circle Seven today, collected from Frenchy and paid me back. So it's all settled, anyhow."

"All right, Lute. It's clear enough now."

"Any more questions, Steele?"

"No."

"Well I've got one more explanation. Until we met up just now I was headed for town. To find you. And to put you wise to—"

"To the fact that Frenchy alibied you in order to alibi himself!" Steele finished.

"You catch on quick, Steele. If you need a hand, I'll—"

"We're enough people, the *segundo* and me. Adios, Lute. Good luck, Marco."

"*Gracias, senor!*" The sheepman beamed with sudden relief. "I savvy notting till Senor Purdy tell me—"

He didn't get to finish whatever he intended to say. Because the sheriff spurted past them, riding hard.

"*Vayamos, segundo!*" he shouted. "Let's go!"

SHORTY was completely befuddled. He hadn't expected Steele to accept Purdy's hard-to-believe explanation so readily. He was surprised at Purdy's loyalty to Judge Bertram, which revealed a side of the man's character hitherto unknown. Shorty was mixed up in the whole tangled affair. All that he understood was that the case had reached a climax and that the sheriff saw need for sudden action.

Shorty's pinto lacked the long, space-devouring stride of Steele's gelding. The little deputy worked the rib irons hard to keep up. They finished their ride to Circle 7 fast, pulling up at the cookshack.

Frenchy was at the wash bench by the door as they descended upon him from around a corner of the low-roofed building. What looked like dismay spread on his face. His long mustache seemed to bristle out straight past his lean, narrow cheeks. His long, beakish nose twitched nervously.

"You back queek, Shariff!" he exclaimed, plunging a hand for the soap and washbasin.

"Hold it!" Steele rapped out. He kneed the gelding close and hauled Jasper out of his vest. "Here!" he said, thrusting the kitten into the cook's dry hand.

There was nothing for Frenchy to do but take it. The limp, sleepy Jasper roused instantly. He sniffed hungrily and mewed.

A Colt fanged out from Steele's right hand. Frenchy, seeing too late how he had been tricked, dropped the cat with a sharp oath, whirled to a shovel that leaned against the cookshack and seized the handle.

Shorty knew the score now. Kicking his feet free of stirrups, he hurled himself bodily at the cook, just as the man aimed a murderous swing of the shovel. Shorty's solid weight bore Frenchy to the ground. Jasper streaked off.

Frenchy was larger than the little deputy and fought with frenzied terror. As they rolled and struggled, he snaked Shorty's .45 from holster. He raised it for a crushing blow.

The Colt roared. But the weapon went spinning out of Frenchy's grasp and he uttered a scream that turned to a gurgling moan as Shorty's freckled right fist drove a blow to the long, lean jaw.

Steele tossed down his lariat. Before the dazed cook could renew his struggles, Shorty had him lashed, hand and foot.

"So you call yourself Pete Marco's

'friend,'" Steele said with withering contempt. "A fine friend, you. Contrived to get him down here so as to throw suspicion for your crime on him, a newcomer, and in prejudice as a sheepman always is in cattle country. Your trickery was bolstered even more by lending him money you stole from Chow Now. It would cinch that suspicion, you figured. You planned this cold-blooded skulduggery for a long time, Frenchy. To learn where your victim had his money stashed, you may have committed murder. Whether Chow Now lives or not, the money'll do you no good. Where is it now?"

French spat venomously and refused to answer.

"It's not far off, that's a cinch, Sheriff!" panted Shorty, picking up his battered hat and clamping it on his flaming topknot. "This here shovel mean anything, yuh figger?"

"Good eye, *segundo*. Probably does. We'll see."

BLUE STEELE stepped from saddle and took the shovel in back of the cookshack. Out there was the usual kitchen dump, awaiting burning when the wind died. There in the middle of it was Jasper, sniffing a mound of newly-turned earth and clawing at it. The cat's action was as plain as words.

Steele's first turn of the shovel revealed freshly-opened, hastily-buried longusta, many cans of it, the contents intact in each. Jasper settled down for a well-deserved feast. He had done his part. Steele returned to Shorty and their prisoner.

Frenchy was slumped on the wash bench. Shorty leaned jauntily in the cookshack doorway, munching on a slab of bread and cold beef.

They had surprised the guilty cook soon after he had buried the longusta, Steele swiftly deduced. Then, as Shorty had said, the money couldn't be far. As the sheriff calculated the situation, a gust of wind scurried across the ranchyard. It plucked and tugged at everything loose—a warped shingle on the cookshack roof, the manes and tails of the horses and the mussed-up hair on Frenchy's bowed head. Oddly, the roller towel above the wash bench didn't flutter.

Steele plunged a hand in it. He brought out a round longusta can. It had been opened, then the jagged-edged top bent back flat. He pried it open again. Shorty, craning over his shoulder, uttered a yelp of triumph.

The can contained a tightly-rolled cylinder of greenback currency. Steele reached into the towel and brought out a second can, re-packed in the same way.

"This all of it, Frenchy?" he demanded.

"All but two hundred I giff Pete Marco." The cook's despair was complete now. "*Sacré*, what bad luck!"

"Canned money, that stumps me, Sheriff!" croaked Shorty.

"Stumped Frenchy, too, I reckon. Till he tortured poor ol' Chow Now into admitting he used the grub shelf for a savings bank. Seems as though he'd sealed his money in empty longusta cans. Nobody would be likely to bother such outlandish, unfamiliar victuals."

"That's what! Might o' been canned rattlesnake, like as not! So the hole under the restaurant floor was just a blind, huh? Migosh, what a dodge! Chinese, they've got some peculiar notions!"

"Some pretty sound ones, too, *segundo*. The robber moon, for instance, turned out to be bad luck, all right. Specially for you, Frenchy."

Steele stowed the canned money in his saddlebags. The 13th moon mystery was solved. The tension had gone from his lean, bronzed face, the rocky hardness from his eyes. All he needed now to complete his satisfaction was to find Chow Now conscious and recovering when they got back to Painted Post.

Sheltered from the wind, the sheriff paused in the cookshack doorway long enough to roll and light a brown-paper cigarette. He felt a welcome let-down, now that it was over.

"Only kick I got," mumbled Shorty as he crammed the last of the hurried sandwich into his mouth, "is that we done too much headwork."

"Too much, *segundo*?"

"Yep. Cheated me out of a heap o' fun—all except this last-minute scrap. And only one measly shot fired. Shucks, we're gittin' too blamed civilized, Sheriff," he sighed regretfully.

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Both men drew their Colts simultaneously

GUN BAIT

By TED FOX

Cowardice forced ex-Sheriff Tex Fleming into one losing fight but a letter from his boy and flaming guns changed the picture!

WALT TAYLOR crawled out from under Jud Craille's saloon on his hands and knees. He looked up and down the dirty alley and rose quickly to his feet. Usually he was up and out of there before daylight, but this morning he had been sicker than usual. He didn't think he had been seen, though, and he breathed easier. No one, not even Jud Craille himself, knew that this was where he lived. That under the saloon's double-planked flooring was where he made his home. "Home" was an old packing case he had dragged there the first night he had come into Little Mesa.

He walked unsteadily up the alley. He was a ragged-looking man in dirty

shirt and baggy-stained trousers. His hair under his slouch hat was matted and unkempt. His face was covered with a week's growth of beard.

He turned in the back door of the saloon, stumbled and almost fell to his knees as he entered the barroom. He dragged himself erect and stood there, swaying, trying to focus his bleary, red-rimmed eyes. The room was empty of customers. Jud Craille stood behind his bar, drying some glasses.

Walt staggered to the bar and clung to it with both hands. He looked at the big, ruddy-faced saloon-keeper imploringly. Craille frowned, then laid down his towel. He took a bottle and glass and set them on the bar.

With trembling hands Walt poured himself a drink. He put the glass to his lips and threw back his head. The reddish brown liquid seared his throat. He poured another and gulped it down. He gasped for breath, but a warmth came into his body. His nerves steadied a little.

He was aware of Jud Craille looking at him. Of Craille saying, "You're killing yoreself on that stuff. For two years that I know of yuh been pouring it down yore gullet. Yuh can't hold together much longer at the rate yuh're goin'."

Walt Taylor looked down at his hands gripping the bar. A sense of shame needled through him. It was the same hellish, soul-sickening shame that had held him in its grip for ten years, turned him into the bum he was now.

From the street outside came the sound of voices, of horses clattering by, and the distant ring of a blacksmith's hammer.

Then Craille's calm voice cut through the stillness in the saloon. "There's a letter here for a gent named Fleming—Tex Fleming. You don't happen to know him, do you?"

THE room spun crazily before Walt's eyes. He held his breath for one long agonizing moment. Then his eyes slowly lifted to meet Craille's level stare. He shook his head dully.

Craille drew a white envelope from his pocket. He looked at the address on the front. "It's addressed to Tex Fleming, Little Mesa, Arizona." He paused. "It's from a place in Texas called Twin Rivers."

Walt felt a little shiver run up his spine. His eyes were fixed on the letter in a glassy stare. He wanted to reach out and snatch it from Craille's fingers.

"Yuh say yuh never heard of this Tex Fleming?" Craille spoke the words softly.

A groan was wrenched from Walt's lips. "No," he shouted. "No, I tell yuh. I don't know who yuh're talking about."

He dragged a trembling hand across his eyes. For ten years he had tried to forget that name, now it had come out of the dead past to slap him in the face.

"I don't know who yuh're talking about," he repeated hoarsely.

"Tex Fleming was one of the greatest fightin' sheriffs Texas ever saw." Craille slowly turned the letter over in his hand. "Some say he was a better sheriff even than Wyatt Earp."

"I never heard of him," Walt whispered.

"Why don't yuh stop lyin'?" Craille said sharply.

Walt's head snapped up. His mouth sagged open.

"I've known who yuh are for over a year," Craille said calmly.

"How?" Walt croaked.

"Yuh gave it away when yuh was drunk."

Walt sagged against the bar. "Who else knows?" he asked.

Craille shook his head. "No one but me."

Walt held out his hand and Craille gave him the letter. With fingers that shook Walt tore open the envelope. A piece of white paper fell out. He held it in front of his eyes and tried to read the words written on it. The lines were a blur.

"It seems this Tex Fleming has a son back in Texas," Craille wiped the bar carefully with a towel. "Every so often he writes his boy, sends him a few dollars. Told his kid that he was sheriff of Mesa County and doin' fine."

Walt stared at the fat saloon-keeper. He felt a surge of anger. "Yuh read it?" he asked.

Craille nodded. "I was curious," he said. "I see a lot of sorry people come in through those swinging doors, but I never seen anyone to beat you."

Walt's hand trembled as he held out the letter eagerly. "What else does it say?" he asked, his speech whisky thick.

"Just that this boy of Tex Fleming's is coming to Little Mesa to see his dad.

He's arriving on the stage today at noon."

Walt staggered. He looked at Craille in wild disbelief.

"That's what the letter says," Craille answered. "May twenty-third. That's today."

Panic swept through Walt. Jim Fleming coming to Little Mesa to see his dad, Sheriff Tex Fleming, alias Walt Taylor, swamper in Craille's saloon and drunken bum. Ten years ago he had left the boy with an uncle in Texas and fled. Ten years ago . . .

It was funny how one minute in a man's life could change his whole destiny. It had taken just sixty seconds to change his destiny; sixty brief seconds in which the great Tex Fleming had become Walt Taylor, a drunken cowardly bum. Suddenly he was living again those sixty seconds when he had faced Drago Walsh in the street of a Texas cowtown, when Walsh had dared him to go for his guns and he had turned and stampeded away like a boogered bronc.

A thousand times since then he had asked himself, "Why? Why had he backed down? Why had he run? Because Drago Walsh was fast as lightning with his guns? Because he was a killer?"

He knew none of these was the right answer. He had faced killers before. Something had snapped in him that day in Texas. Maybe it was the inevitable result of too many gunfights. Maybe it was because his wife, Mary, had died only a few short hours before. How can a man explain fear?

The whole town had witnessed his cowardice. Only Jim, his kid, had never learned the truth. Jim was seven at the time. A thin spindly kid who thought of his father as a real brave gent, same as most kids of seven think of their dads. It was why old Walt, the swamper, had written him an occasional letter, had told him he was a sheriff in Arizona.

PIVOTING blindly from the bar, Walt stumbled to the door. He stepped out onto the walk in front of the saloon and started up the street at a run. He was cold sober now but he was in a daze. A single thought burned through his mind. To get away as fast as he could. To leave town before Jim got here and saw him, before he learned the truth about his dad, Tex Fleming.

He was so preoccupied with these thoughts he wasn't aware of the people running by him up the street. He didn't hear the man who shouted a warning at him. It wasn't until the first shot roared out that he whirled and stared up the street at the band of horsemen racing into town with Colts flaming.

Wild panicky fear knifed through Walt Taylor when he heard those guns. For an instant he stood frozen in his tracks, then he turned and ran for the nearest building. He darted inside. It was the general store and he ran clear to the back and crouched down behind some sacks of feed. He was trembling. His breath came in short panting gasps. His heart pounded against his ribs with sledge-hammer force.

A fusillade of shots sounded outside. The pound of hoofbeats grew louder. The storekeeper stood in the doorway with his rifle at his shoulder.

"It's Blacky Morgan and his blasted killers," he shouted over his shoulder. He ducked back as a bullet plowed into the wood by his head.

Walt peered over the feed sacks. Through the window he could look out into the street and see a dozen or more horsemen riding up and down, shooting at the buildings on either side. Bootheels hit the plankwalk and then two hard-faced men burst into the store. The storekeeper went down before their blazing guns.

Walt Taylor hugged the floor. He caught a glimpse of men running through the store. They had gunnysacks and were dumping supplies into them. The sound of shots from the street grew louder. A horse screamed. Then the men ran for the door. They vanished outside. Walt lay where he was. He was bathed in sweat. He felt suffocated and sick to his stomach. He cursed. That was what fear did to a man, what the sound of guns did to him.

He was thinking of Jim as he lay there. Of Jim riding into Little Mesa on the stage, expecting to find Tex Fleming sheriff. Finding instead that his father was a miserable cowardly drunkard.

Walt grew slowly aware of the silence that had fallen over the street outside. He waited a minute longer, saw townsmen begin emerging from buildings, listened to the sound of their voices as they

gathered in little knots to talk in loud excited tones. He rose to his feet finally and moved toward the door. He stepped gingerly around the dead storekeeper.

One of the outlaws lay sprawled in the street. An angry crowd stood around him. He was alive. A bullet had gone through his shoulder and spilled him from his horse. Walt turned away. He continued up the street. At a run now.

He reached the livery-stable. Jake Hardy stood in the doorway and Walt drew some money from his pocket. It was all he had. It was what he had been saving up to send Jim. He thrust it at the liveryman.

"A horse," he gasped. "I want to ride to Tucson. I'll leave it there for you to pick up."

Hardy looked from the money to Walt, then with a shrug he turned into his stable. He came back a minute later, leading a saddled horse. Walt put his foot in the stirrup and tried to pull himself into the saddle. He didn't have the strength in his arms. Ten years of drinking rot-gut liquor had robbed his arms of their strength. He fell back heavily.

"Going some place?"

He whirled and stared at Jud Craille standing in the doorway of the stable. Craille was still wearing his white apron over his corpulent stomach. His face was set and grim.

"Going some place?" he repeated.

Walt turned and put his foot in the stirrup again. Craille reached him before he could drag himself into the saddle. A beefy hand gripped his arm.

"You can't run out on that boy of yours, Taylor," the barkeep said.

Walt shook his arm free and clawed at the saddle. Craille's hand closed over his shoulder and held him in a vise-like grip.

"Yuh're comin' back to the saloon with me." The big man spoke sharply. "Yuh're going to pull yourself together and wait for yore son. He'll be here in another hour."

"No," Walt gasped. "It's better I leave now. I can't face him this way."

CRAILLE twisted him around and pushed him toward the door. He didn't say anything more. When Walt stopped he gave him another push. Walt stepped out into the street. Craille grasped his arm and led him forcibly down the street past a crowd gathered in front of the sheriff's office.

"This Blacky Morgan and his gang are getting too bold," Sheriff Bob Coyle was telling the crowd angrily. "Every man get on his horse. We'll follow 'em and gun 'em out. I deputize all of yuh."

A shout of approval burst out and the crowd scattered and ran for their horses. Craille led Walt into his saloon.

"Listen—" he swung fiercely on Walt then— "Back when I was a kid my paw stole money from a man and was sent to jail. When he got out he was ashamed to come home. He disappeared and it wasn't until years later that I heard he'd drunk himself to death."

Craille paused and his hand fell slowly from Walt's shoulder. "He did one wrong thing and ran away from it all the rest of his life. He didn't want to face me. Just the way you don't want to face yore boy."

Craille brought his fist down on the bar sharply. "Let me tell yuh that hurt worse than knowin' he was a thief and a jailbird. If he'd have come home I could have helped him and he'd probably be alive today. Blast it all, man, he was my father. He shouldn't have run away from me."

"What's that got to do with me?" Walt whispered.

"Just that if yuh run away yore boy's goin' to be hurt bad," Craille answered quietly.

Walt looked down at his ragged clothes.

"We can fix that," Craille said.

"Then what?" Walt asked dully.

"Then yuh can go away with him. You can leave as soon as he gets here and before someone tells him about Walt Taylor. He won't never know that part."

Walt's glance lifted to Craille's face. "Why yuh doin' this?" he asked.

Craille returned his gaze levelly. "Because I hate to see any man sink as low as my father did. I know from my own experience how that boy's goin' to feel if you run out on him. Call me a meddlin' fool if yuh want to."

A faint glimmer of hope began to burn inside of Walt Taylor. He looked into Craille's kindly face and wondered. . . .

"Yuh want to see yore boy after all these years, don't yuh?" Craille's voice knifed through the thoughts whirling in Walt's brain.

A groan escaped Walt's lips. There hadn't been a moment in the last ten years, drunk or sober, when he hadn't wished Jim was with him.

"You better not waste any more time," Craille said. He drew some money out of his pocket and gave it to Walt. "Go buy yourself some new clothes. I'll be heatin' some water so's you can shave."

Walt hesitated.

"Call it a grubstake yuh can pay back later," Craille snapped. "Get goin', man, before the stage gets in."

Walt left the saloon and turned down the street to the drygoods store two blocks away. Bob Coyle and his deputies were just riding out of town on the outlaws' trail but he hardly glanced in their direction. His mind was intent on what Craille had told him in the saloon and his hopes mounted with each step. He was grateful to the fat barkeep.

He turned eagerly into the drygoods store. He could see it all clearly now. Ten minutes after Jim got off the stage they would be riding out of town together. They would go somewhere far away. Jim would never know about Walt Taylor. He would never know about that episode in Texas.

Walt returned to the saloon minutes later. As he walked up the street, the clothes he had bought over his arm, he noticed that the town was silent, the street deserted. Every able-bodied man had gone out with Bob Coyle after Blacky Morgan and his gang. Morgan had been terrorizing the district for months and with a fervor that surprised him, Walt hoped they would catch the killers. Just for a moment all the old instincts of the lawman that had lain dormant for so long came alive in him.

Then he was entering the saloon and laying the new clothes across the bar. Craille had hot water and a razor ready. Walt stood behind the bar and looked in the mirror at the gaunt, hollow-eyed face that stared back at him and for an instant his hopes died.

"Get them whiskers off," Craille's voice said at his elbow. "It'll make some difference. If Jim says anything about your being pale or thin yuh can say yuh been sick."

With hands that shook, Walt lathered his face, then shaved slowly and carefully. He combed his hair. When he was finished he changed into his new clothes. Levis, gray shirt, black boots, a black sombrero and a range jacket—copper-riveted like his pants.

ONCE again he looked at himself in the mirror. He stared at his reflection for a long minute. The transformation in his appearance was startling and a slow smile parted his lips. His shoulders straightened. His head came up. He turned and looked at his side view. By God, he was almost respectable-looking.

Craille pressed some more money into his hand. "Get Hardy to saddle two horses for you and hold them ready."

Walt nodded and turned to the door. He stepped outside. The street was empty and he was thankful for that. He wouldn't have been able to face the curious wondering stares of the townspeople. When he walked into the stable Hardy didn't recognize him at first. Then his eyes widened in surprise.

Walt gave the liveryman his dinero. "Two horses," he said. "I'll be by for them later."

He turned back to the saloon. He was halfway across the street when he stopped short, as though he had walked into a brick wall. His head dropped. His shoulders sagged. All Craille's carefully-conceived plans exploded in his face at that moment.

He had forgotten that he had told Jim in his letters that he was Sheriff of Little Mesa. When Jim arrived and found that he wasn't, Jim would ask questions.

Panic rose in Walt Taylor. His hopes turned to despair. He started running for the saloon.

Then he brought up short again. He turned back to the stable. It would be easier to go away. To not have to face Jim at all. To run.

He stood in the middle of the street, looking around him wildly. Jim would be here any minute. He just had time to leave. But if he went now he would never see Jim again.

And in that brief moment of hesitation his glance lifted to the sign over the door of the nearest building. SHERIFF'S OFFICE. He stared at it blankly. He could look inside the door and see that it was empty.

Slowly he approached the door. Bob Coyle was gone. The town was deserted. Did he dare pose as the Sheriff of Little Mesa, just long enough to prove to Jim that he hadn't lied to him?

He stepped inside. His breathing was loud in the empty silent room. He walked to Coyle's desk, bent quickly and opened the drawer. He drew out a silver badge. With tense fingers he pinned it to his vest. He looked down at it.

Then his head came up sharply. He heard the sound of hoofbeats coming up the street, the crack of a whip, a voice shouting. He didn't look out, but knew it must be the stage. He darted to some gun-belts hanging from pegs on the wall. He took down a brace of Colts and strapped them around his waist. They felt heavy on his hips. They felt strange. It had been ten years since he had worn any guns.

He sank weakly into a chair at Bob Coyle's desk. He looked like a lawman now, but inside he was still Walt Taylor, shivering and afraid. Through the window he saw the stage stop in front of the hotel. The hotel proprietor came out and caught the mail sacks the driver threw down to him. Then the stage door opened and a tall, sun-browned kid stepped out. He stretched and looked about him. He said something to the driver and the driver pointed up the street.

Walt Taylor leaned forward eagerly in his chair, watching as the kid started up the street toward him. He was a lanky, clean-looking boy dressed in levis and white Stetson. Walt felt a slow tightening around his heart. He looked a little like Mary.

Out of the corners of his eyes he saw Craille come out of his saloon and stand on the porch, looking at the kid. Craille started forward, hesitated, then drew back. The kid stopped in front of the sheriff's office.

Then he was climbing the steps. Walt rose unsteadily to his feet. The doorway darkened and he moved around his desk.

They met in the middle of the room, their hands locking as they stood there silently, smiling at each other.

"Glad to see yuh, Jim," Walt said, his voice heavy with emotion. "Glad yuh came."

"I would've come sooner if Uncle Ben hadn't needed me at the ranch." Jim's voice was deep, a man's voice. "He's had some tough luck, but he's in the clear now."

Walt stepped back to the desk and put his hands on it to steady himself. He didn't take his eyes from Jim's face. God, how it reminded him of Mary.

"I got yore letter this morning," Walt said. "If it had been a day later it would have missed me."

Jim sat on the desk beside him. He pushed his Stetson back on his head. "How come?" he asked.

Walt groped for the right words, the words Craille had told him to say. "I lost out in the last election, son." He fought to keep his voice steady, to keep the lie from showing. "I'm out of a job here now. I was gettin' ready to leave today."

Jim was looking at him, a slight frown puckering his brow. He was looking at Walt's face, at the lines in it, and the black hollows under his eyes.

"I been sick," Walt muttered. "That's why the voters decided they needed a new man."

"Where're we goin'?" Jim asked.

"Wherever you say," Walt answered. "I thought we might go off some place and start a little outfit of our own, you and me."

Jim's eyes brightened. "Suits me," he said enthusiastically.

WALT breathed a sigh of relief. He had crossed the first hurdle. Now he was ready to leave. Fast. Before Bob Coyle came back.

"I got some horses ready." He stood up. "Nothin' to keep us here any longer."

He reached for his badge to unpin it. His hand froze halfway to his vest. A muffled shot had sounded down the street. It came from the direction of the hotel. He exchanged startled glances with Jim.

Another shot boomed out, then the loud drumming of horses' feet. Jim sprang to the door. Walt stood frozen.

Then running footsteps sounded outside and Jim stepped back as Jud Craille burst into the room. He drew up sharply, staring from Jim to Walt. His gaze dropped from Walt's badge to the guns strapped at his waist. In one glance he sized up the situation.

"It's Blacky Morgan," he gasped. "He didn't leave with the rest of the gang. He stayed to help the gent who was shot. Doc was working on him in the hotel, trying to get the bullet out of his shoulder so he would hang. Blacky got him away. He just escaped on that horse you heard."

"Blacky's still in town. He's out there now, comin' up the street," Craille said quickly. "Bob Coyle's been callin' him some pretty hard names lately. He's comin' to settle the score."

Walt felt an icy hand close around his heart. The shock took his breath away.

"He's comin' all right." Jim was staring out the open door.

Walt looked past him, saw the figure of a man coming up the plankwalk toward the sheriff's office. He was big, black-haired, brutal-faced. Two guns hung at his hips.

Walt felt his strength drain from his arms and legs. Jim was looking at him expectantly. There was excitement in Jim's eyes, and confidence.

Morgan stopped in front of the doorway. He fell into a crouch when he saw the three men in the room. He had a thin slit for a mouth and cruel beady eyes. Killer eyes!

"Come on out here, Sheriff." His voice was like a file rasping on steel. "Come out with your guns smoking."

Walt Taylor listened dully to those words of challenge. They had a familiar ring to them. There was a familiar pattern to this whole set-up. The killer inviting him to shoot it out. The fear that cried out in him to turn and run.

Only this time Jim was here, standing beside him, waiting, watching him with that puzzled frown creeping into his eyes again. Walt felt sick to his stomach. Blast Craille. He should have run away that morning, like he'd intended. He shouldn't have listened to Craille. He should have told him to go to blazes.

"Are you comin' out, Sheriff? Or am I comin' in after yuh?"

Walt drew a sobbing breath. That puzzled look in Jim's eyes was turning to doubt. In another minute it would turn to disgust. In another minute Jim would know the whole sickening truth.

But he couldn't do it. He couldn't go through with it. He was a coward. He'd run once. He would again.

And yet, one slow step at a time, he was moving toward the door. He heard Craille's whispered, "Godalmighty!" and he wanted to run. He was afraid. Horribly afraid. But he had reached the door now. He couldn't seem to stop. His steps were keeping pace with two words that kept pounding through his head, "Jim's watching! Jim's watching! Jim's watching!"

He came out onto the porch. He saw Morgan's hands dive for his guns. His own hands streaked down. His Colts leaped up. He felt a moment of surprise. Ten years had slowed him, but there was still speed in his draw. Desperately he thumbed the hammers. Black powdersmoke rose into his eyes. The sound of shots roared in his ears. He heard bullets thudding into the building at his back.

Then the only sound that filled the street was the loud clicking of his hammers as they fell on empty shells. The powdersmoke lifted from in front of his eyes. He stared at Blacky Morgan lying in the street. The big outlaw was sprawled out on his face, a thin trickle of blood running down from a hole in his head.

Then Jim was standing beside Walt. There was awe and respect in his eyes. He walked down the steps and nudged Morgan with his toe. He looked back at Walt and grinned.

SLOWLY Walt holstered his guns. He had done it! By heaven, he had shot it out with a killer and won! His glance lifted and looked into Craille's smiling face.

"I knew you could do it." There was relief in Craille's voice. "I knew you could do it if you gave yourself half a chance."

Walt drew a deep breath. It was hard to believe that after ten years spent in hell he could once more walk among men without fear, and without shame.

The few townsmen who hadn't ridden out with Bob Coyle were running up the street toward the sheriff's office. Walt quickly unpinned the badge from his vest and handed it to Craille.

"Jim and I are leavin' now," he said. "Take care of things here for me, explain to Coyle and the others."

He called to Jim and the three of them moved toward the stable. Hardy had their horses ready. Walt swung into the saddle. Hardy was looking at him in amazement. He started to say something, but Walt reached down and shook hands with Craille.

"So long," he said. "Yuh'll be hearin' from me."

And as he rode away with Jim at his side, Craille's answer came back to Walt, loud and clear. "So long, Tex Fleming."

THE STUBBORN FOOL

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

Case-hardened by war, Jeff Keyes rides back to his home ranch valley to climb up two sides of a hate-hot triangle of death!

CHAPTER I

Hate Haunts the Jornadas

SHELTER was one of the basic needs of a man, and with only an ax and his skill for tools Jeff Keyes threw up a cabin back in the Jornada Hills. During the time it took to fell and trim trees, turn them into logs, and the logs into walls, he was not molested. Even after the cabin was under roof, no visitors happened by. But Jeff expected some, and the trouble they would bring. For that reason, he never slept indoors but bedded down at night, after darkness hid his movements, off in a clump of cottonwoods.

Four years of war had made him a light sleeper, and so when the riders finally came, the third night after his cabin was completed, he woke and came from his blankets with gun in hand, at the first sound of drumming hoofs.

Waiting among the trees, in the thicker darkness, he watched the band drop down a slope and across the floor of the little valley. They rode in single file, with as little noise as possible, a dozen men in all. It was not until a pitch torch flared in one rider's hand that Jeff saw they were masked. The

Their torches uplifted like banners, the hooded

An Action Novelet

riders loped on toward the next farm

masks were hoodlike, dropping to the wearers' shoulders, with eye-holes cut into them, and white in color.

Jeff frowned. He had heard rumors of such night riders. They had been spawned in the aftermath of the War, but in the deep South, in such hard-hit States as Georgia, not here in Texas. Still, the hidden man had to believe his own eyes. This was Texas, and these were night riders who hid their identity behind masks!

The band swung toward the cabin, the rider with the torch lighting the way. They halted in a semi-circle, facing the building, and at last a voice sounded: "Keyes, show yourself!"

The hoodlike mask muffled the voice, and when no reply came, the speaker drew a pistol and fired a shot into the air.

"He's not here!"

"Where'd he be? He's holed up here, ain't he—hiding out?"

"Maybe he heard us, got scared and lit out."

"Couldn't have got far. Two horses in the corral, and that's all he's got. Keyes is afoot. We'll scatter and find him."

SO MUCH talk reached Jeff. He had a Henry rifle in his hand, a Colt revolver in his holster, but even so well armed he could not stand off such odds. If these men searched, they would find him. But Jeff Keyes had gone through too much, seen too much of death, to feel real fear. He could and would fight, if attacked, and his chances lay in opening fire now, while the band was bunched together and off guard.

He raised the Henry, but not all the way to his shoulder. His mind revolted against killing from ambush. And too, he had no proof that this masked band meant him harm. Jeff stepped from the trees.

"Looking for me?"

"Keyes?"

"My name. That's my cabin. You're too many for me, but I'm armed and I'll fight. What'd you want with me?"

"A friendly talk," the spokesman for the band said. "Nothing more. Come out farther, so we can see you. You've got nothing to fear."

Jeff could only take the speaker's word for it. He advanced slowly, until the glow of the flickering torch fell upon his face. He was a tall man, lean, dark faced. His eyes and lips were humorless. There was whirlpool of movement as the mounted men formed a circle about him. Each rider was heavily armed, but no weapons were drawn from holsters. Though he felt no alarm, Jeff was uneasy.

It was a nerve-knotting experience, talking to men without faces.

"I'm listening," he said.

"We're giving you a chance to join up, Keyes," the spokesman said. "The War's lost, and the Confederacy's dead. But we're still alive, and got our homes to defend—or win back. Maybe we're not Secesh anymore, but, we're still Texans. This is our range, and we aim to win it back from those no-good carpetbagging squatters that came like a horde of locusts when the war ended.

"We're outnumbered, so we've got to fight from under cover. You wore the Gray, friend, and you've come back to find your father and brothers dead and your ranch cut up into fenced fields by sod-busting farmers. Well, we've all lost land and kinfolk—like you. We aim to do something about it. You savvy, Keyes?"

"Maybe."

"You willing to throw in with us?"

"And hide my face behind a flour-sack mask?" Jeff said. "I don't know. Me, I don't like that kind of fighting."

"A small thing, Keyes," the hooded spokesman said. "Once we've cleared out the carpetbaggers, driven them back North where they belong, we can take off our masks. You come in with us, friend, and you'll see our faces. You'll know us for men who were your neighbors and friends before the war. We're honest men, every last one of us."

"I'll think it over."

"You want back your Keyhole Ranch, don't you?"

"More, I want to find the men who killed my father and brothers."

"We'll help you do that," the masked man said. "And we'll help you string up the dirty sons. You won't be able to buck those carpetbaggers alone, Keyes. You've been a marked man ever since you've come back. The only thing that's saved you is that you've holed up in an unlikely place. But we found you, and so can the gunslicks hired by the carpetbaggers. Once you're found, you'll be a dead one."

"Still," Jeff said, "I want to think it over."

"All right," the masked man said. "But remember one thing. Any man not with us is against us. And we'll treat him as an enemy."

He lifted his arm in signal. Reins were gathered up, mounts swung about. The torch was flung to the ground, where it guttered a moment and then went out. The band swung away, headed out across the valley and almost at once was lost in the darkness. Jeff Keyes stood lost in thought. For a moment, he was gripped by an impulse to call them back. He needed friends. But somehow he knew that not even honest men could be trusted when they took to wearing masks. He would have to play the game alone.

Alone? A man who lived alone had less than a complete life. He grew sour, a creature of dark moods. A man who rode alone found only loneliness. And one who fought alone was apt to find himself suspect in the eyes of all men. Jeff Keyes knew all that, yet he asked himself, "Who can I trust?"

The visit of the masked band had left him restless, and the day following he saddled one of his horses and rode away from his place for the first time. An hour's slow ride brought him to the top of timbered Crown Point, highest of the Jornadas, and from there he could look across the vast valley that once had been the Keyes ranch.

His father, Sam Keyes, had settled there back in the days when Texas had been a republic. He had helped free Texas from Mexico, then had settled upon rangeland that no other man claimed. Sam had married a girl from Missouri and raised his family. He had named his valley the Keyhole, and there had been no more prosperous ranch. True, as the years passed, he had been forced to fight Comanches and rustlers. But he had ruled his domain like a feudal lord of old.

Now as Jeff Keyes, the youngest of Old Sam's sons, looked down upon the Keyhole, none of the great herds could be seen. And none of the hundreds of saddle horses. The ranch buildings were gone. Now, as far as Jeff could see in the pale moonlight, Keyhole Valley was cut up by fences and checker-boarded with tilled fields.

There were a dozen small clusters of buildings, farm houses and barns and silos. If there were cattle at all, they were milch cows. If horses, they were of the sort to harness to a plow. After a long look, Jeff turned his face away. He put his horse down Crown Point, and an hour later was beyond the Jornadas and upon a wagon road.

He came to the wooden bridge across Blue Creek. It at least, of the structures built by Keyes' hands, still stood Jeff walked his gelded bay over the span, listening to the music of the swift water. Then his mount grew skittish, and Jeff saw, just ahead and off the road, a buckboard and team. He heard a voice call out, and reined in.

At first he saw no one. There were patches of brush here, and below, along the creek bank, some big willows grew. Jeff called, "Hello?" The voice replied, weakly, incoherently. Dismounting, Jeff moved into the brush and through it. He saw a man, now, by one of the willows. It was not until he was close that he realized that the man was tied to the tree's trunk, that he was naked to the waist, and his back was a bloody mass.

Jeff took out his knife and cut the rope, then had to grab quickly to keep the man from sagging to the ground. He was a gray-haired man, thin, small of stature, perhaps fifty years of age. And he was unashamedly crying. Jeff was jolted to the core.

"What happened to you, friend?"

"Whipped," the man sobbed. "They gave me the lash."

"Who did?"

"The Hoodlums."

"You mean those masked riders?" Jeff asked, and didn't need an answer. He knew.

CHAPTER II

The Shadow of Death

THE man continued to sob, and Jeff Keyes felt no contempt for him. He knew that this was not an outburst caused by physical pain; it was of the spirit, for a man who was subjected to the lash felt himself degraded. Jeff said, "Easy, easy. You're all right now."

He saw the man's shirt and hat upon the ground, and he went to pick them up. When he got back, the man had control of himself. And Jeff helped him into his shirt. "You better get that back treated, friend," he said. "It's plenty

bad. I'll help you to your wagon."

He let the man lean upon him, then lifted him bodily to the buckboard. He saw the hurt man was near to collapse, so he said, "I'll tie my horse to the back of your rig, and drive you to wherever you're going."

"I don't want to put you out, stranger."

"No bother."

He brought his bay over, tied its reins to the buckboard, then climbed to the driver's seat and took up the team's reins.

"Which way?"

"To Keyhole Valley. I was on my way home from town when the Hoodlums caught me. I shouldn't have been out after dark."

Jeff started the team, put it over the wooden bridge, headed along the road that led through a pass in the Jornada Hills and into the valley. The two big grays needed no coaxing, but moved along at a fast trot. Farm horses, Jeff thought. He'd guessed at the start that the man was a dirt farmer. He glanced at his companion.

"Why do you call those masked men 'Hoodlums'?"

"That's what everybody in the Valley calls them. They call themselves the White Hoods, because of their white flour-sack masks, but we farmer folks call them the White Hoodlums—because they're just that, no-goods, hoodlums."

"What they got against you?"

"They hate me because I'm a dirt farmer. My name's Luke Howard, stranger. I'm from Ohio. Been here two years now, and had trouble all that time. Those hoodlums are cattlemen, who used to use this country for range, and they're trying to run us out."

"How'd you come to take over their rangeland?"

"We bought it," Howard said. "With hard cash."

"Who'd you buy it from?"

"Me, I bought my acres from a man named Abbott. Judge Abbott, over in town. All us settlers bought from him. Judge Abbott owned all of Keyhole Valley. He still owns the north half, that's still unsettled."

"Never heard of this Judge Abbott."

"Maybe because you're a stranger here?"

"Maybe," Jeff said, and snapped the grays with the ribbons.

In the old days, before Jeff Keyes went off to war, the road had led to the Keyhole Ranch headquarters. Now, on Luke Howard's directions, Jeff found the road ran on, straight as a die, as a throughfare up the valley, with farms on either side. The Howard farm was about two miles from where the Keyes ranchhouse had stood. Before halting by the two-storied frame house, Jeff had a glimpse of the big barn and other smaller farm buildings. A light showed through the front windows, and a woman came to the door.

"My daughter, Laurie," Luke Howard said.

"She can fix up your back?"

"Sure; Laurie's handy at everything a farm woman needs to know."

"I'll help you down," Jeff said, and got from the buckboard.

It was not until he helped Luke Howard down that the girl realized that something was wrong. Then she came running across the porch and down to the buckboard. "Dad, what's happened?"

"The Hoodlums caught me, Laurie."

The girl gasped, "Oh, no!" She took her father's arm, and helped Jeff get him into the house. They entered the parlor, but Jeff said, "His back'll need attention. Better take him back to the kitchen, where you can heat water. You got any carbolic, Miss?"

SHE nodded jerkily, and Jeff saw she was biting her under lip to hold back her tears. They got Luke back to the kitchen, and Jeff had him remove his shirt. The girl had lighted candles, and now poured water from a wooden pail into an iron kettle hanging in the fireplace. She was a slender girl, taller than her father, and Jeff's gaze followed her about the kitchen. She brought a bottle from a cupboard, set it upon the table. She fetched a basin. Her face was grave, and she kept glancing worriedly at her father, who now sat astraddle of a chair with his arms folded across the back. "You'll be all right, Dad," she whispered.

"I'll never be all right, after this," Luke Howard said. "Why'd they have to do it to me? I never did anybody harm."

"It's wrong," the girl said. "Everything they do is wrong!"

"What more have they done?" Jeff asked.

The girl turned, lips parted to answer. But she didn't speak. Her eyes narrowed, gazed at him with inquiry if not with suspicion. Luke saw that she was studying Jeff, and said, "This stranger found me out there, Laurie. He cut me loose and helped me back."

"I guess you don't need me for anything more," Jeff said. "So I'll ride out."

"No hurry, friend," Luke said. "I ain't even thanked you, yet. Let's get acquainted. What's your name?"

"My name is Keyes."

"Keyes?" repeated Luke Howard. He seemed to probe his memory. "I heard the name somewheres. Laurie, you remember it?"

"A family named Keyes once owned this valley," the girl said, still watching Jeff uncertainly. "Or so I heard from the neighbors."

"That was before Judge Abbott owned it?" Luke asked.

"That's right," Jeff replied. "Before Judge Abbott owned it." He stepped to the kitchen door. "I'll just leave this way."

Luke again would have protested his going, but the girl said, "Let Mr. Keyes go, if he wishes. I'm sure he doesn't care to be friendly with farm people." She faced Jeff, squarely. "You're a cattleman, aren't you, Mr. Keyes?" she asked, pointedly. "Like the Hoodlums, you're one who believes that we settlers don't belong here. Isn't that right?"

"I have no fault to find with you or your father, Miss Howard."

"Perhaps not as people, as individuals," Laurie said. "But you hate us for settling here and turning your cattle range into farmland. Yes, I think you'd better leave, Mr. Keyes."

Luke Howard cautioned, "Laurie, girl, that's no way to talk," but she was unrelenting. Jeff stared back at her for a moment, liking the picture of her. Auburn hair, green-gray eyes, red lips that should be smiling—and were stern instead. Then he turned to the door again, but it swung open as he reached out. A tall blond young man with a rockhard but undeniably handsome face stepped in.

His eyes looked Jeff up and down, jumped their glance to Luke Howard, then gazed at the girl.

"Something wrong?"

"The Hoodlums lashed Dad, Pete."

"So?" said the newcomer. Then, slowly: "It's got to be stopped."

Laurie went on, "Mr. Keyes here found Dad and brought him home. Mr. Keyes—" Her voice was civil, nothing more—"This is Pete Lowell, our nearest neighbor."

Lowell nodded, and Jeff returned it. Neither man offered to shake hands. Jeff said, "S'long," stepped out, pulling the door closed. As he circled the house to find his horse, he wondered why Pete Lowell, who was a dirt farmer, wore high-heeled Texas boots mounted with silver Mexican spurs. Clodhopper shoes were the sort of footgear to wear at plowing.

Mounted, heading back out of Keyhole Valley, Jeff tried to put the Howards and Pete Lowell out of his mind. But he could not forget how badly Luke had been beaten, and he told himself that if that was the sort of work the masked band pulled, he certainly would not join it. Nor could he put Laurie Howard out of his thoughts. He wondered what it would be like to see her smile—and be the man at whom she smiled. As for Pete Lowell, he was a man to puzzle about. Jeff had plenty to think about, all the way to town.

CHAPTER III

Jeff Gets Evidence

CROSSROADS, TEXAS, in '61, had been a town of no more than twenty buildings and houses. As Jeff remembered, there had been a hide warehouse and a stock dealer's place, an express office which served as stage station and bank, two general stores, and two saloons. Now, five years later, he saw that the town had tripled in size. There were five saloons, one of them a honky-tonk and gambling hall, and a new firm of merchants.

A hotel stood next to the express company which, in a new false-fronted building, bore a sign reading:

Amberton Bank & Express Company—
Frank Amberton, Agent.

Jeff dismounted before the bank building, glanced at the second floor windows and found them lighted. A man came from a saloon and headed along the board sidewalk, and Jeff said, "Some informa-

tion, mister. Does Frank Amberton live upstairs?"

"That he does."

"Obliged," Jeff said, and tied his reins to the hitch-rail.

There was an open flight of steps at the left side of the building, and they took Jeff to the door of Amberton's living quarters. He knocked, heard Amberton call out, "Who is it?"

"Jeff Keyes."

Amberton came to the door, exclaimed heartily, "Jeff Keyes—you old son!" He thrust out his hand, and Jeff grasped it. In the old days they had been friends. They had gone on hunting trips into the Jornada Hills, after deer, when Amberton, by nature a townsman, had felt cramped in his office. They had spent many an evening drinking together, or at cards. And yet, as Jeff always had known, they had little in common.

Pulled into Amberton's parlor, the comfortable room of a man who liked his ease, Jeff was given a chair, a drink, and a cigar. He found Amberton as hearty and friendly as ever, yet somehow changed. Though the man smiled his pleasure over Jeff's return, his eyes seemed chill and wary. He had grown heavier, thicker about the middle. But he looked just what he was, a prosperous townsman.

"You're a banker now, Frank?"

"I got hold of enough money to buy out this end of the express company," Amberton said, with some pride. "I turned it into a real bank."

"You always were ambitious."

"A man's got to be, Jeff. But tell me about yourself. I heard talk that you were alive, but I thought it was just that—talk. You were reported dead, killed at Gettysburg."

"A mistake," Jeff said. "I was wounded, taken prisoner by the Yanks. They fixed me up, then gave me a chance to get out of prison camp. I gave my word of honor, got in return a Yankee uniform, and was shipped to Wyoming to soldier against the Sioux. After the war ended, when I was mustered out, I met a man from here—from home. He told me what had happened to the Keyhole. It took the heart out of me, and for a long time I figured I'd never come back. But then I got to thinking. . . . Frank, what actually did happen here?"

Amberton frowned, downed a second drink. "Jeff, I hate to tell you. But I suppose you should hear it from a friend. Your father had bad luck after you left home. Like every rancher he lost most of his riders to the army. He kept your brothers, Bart and Hal, at home, but they couldn't protect the Keyhole."

"Protect it?" Jeff said.

"The war didn't touch us here," Amberton said. "But we had a reign of terror. A wild bunch started raiding. They called themselves guerillas, but they were nothing but damned rustlers. They hit the Keyhole hardest, because it was the biggest spread. Sam Keyes lost thousands of head of cattle, hundreds of horses. This was in the second year of the war. Didn't he write you, Jeff?"

"I had letters," Jeff said. "But Sam Keyes wasn't one to tell his troubles, even to a son."

"Well, things got worse and worse," Amberton went on. "Bart and Hal met up with the guerillas, and there was a big fight. Four of the guerillas were killed, but Bart and Hal died, too. After that, the guerillas set out to finish the Keyhole. They stripped it of stock, burned the ranch buildings, shot Old Sam and left him for dead. He pulled through, but his health was broken. Just before Appomattox, he died. I would have written to you, but, like I said, you were reported as killed in action."

JEFF nodded, his face bleak. "Give me another drink," he said. Then, after downing the whiskey: "What happened to the ranch?"

"Old Sam sold it, knowing he hadn't long to live," Amberton said. "He let it go for a song—seven thousand dollars. I guess you know why. He never believed you were dead, and he wanted you to have something. He figured squatters would grab up Keyhole Valley, once he was gone, so he took the money. It's here in my bank, in your name, Jeff."

"He sold it to an hombre named Judge Abbott?"

"That's right. Ben Abbott. He claims to be a lawyer, and folks here called him 'Judge.' The old settlers curse him for a carpetbagger, because he's a Northerner. But the truth is, he came here long before the war ended. He'd told Sam Keyes he meant to build the Keyhole back up as a cattle ranch, but once he'd bought it he brought in farmers."

"And got fat rich, selling the Keyhole as farmland?"

"That's right, Jeff. Judge Abbott's a shrewd operator."

"He's here in town?"

Amberton nodded. "He opened a law office, and he lives at the new hotel—which he built," he said uneasily. "Jeff, you don't aim to go gunning for him?"

Jeff looked squarely at his friend. "Should I, Frank?"

Amberton sighed. "Jeff, I'm glad you're alive. But I hate to see you come back to take up a feud. You haven't a chance. Abbott is too tough to buck. Why not take your seven thousand and leave these parts, and start over somewhere else?"

"Not yet," Jeff said. "Not until I find the men who murdered my father and brothers." He rose and faced the banker. "Frank, you were here during the trouble. You know everything that goes on within a hundred miles of your bank. Who were the men ramrodding that guerilla outfit?"

"I've no evidence, Jeff, only suspicions."

"That's enough for me, Frank."

"Well, from what I could learn," Amberton said uneasily, "Judge Abbott was the brains behind the whole rotten business. He came here with plenty of cash and a couple of tough gun hands. He recruited his so-called guerillas from back in the badlands, but he was shrewd enough to work from under-cover. He preyed on other ranchers, as well as on Sam Keyes, but mighty few men suspect him. Even the White Hoods don't seem to blame him for what's happened."

"The hombres who call themselves the White Hoods are fools, Frank," Jeff said sourly. "They flog the farmers, and don't go after the men who brought the settlers in. Who besides Abbott were in on it?"

"His two gunhands carried out his orders and did the actual dirty work," Amberton said. "You want their names, Jeff?"

"Why not?"

"You'll be a dead man, if you go after them."

"I'll take my chances, Frank."

"Why not leave them to the White Hoods?" Amberton said. "That outfit will get around to them. I've been neutral in the whole business, but rather than see you fight alone I'll turn the Hoods on Abbott and his toughs. You willing, Jeff?"

"I don't like the way the Hoods do things," Jeff said. "I'd rather go after Abbott and the others on my own. Name them, Frank."

"One's Curt Dodson. Since the end of the war, he's opened and operated a big saloon and dancehall here in town."

"And the other?"

"A young hombre named Pete Lowell," Amberton told him. "He's the most dangerous, and the trickiest. He's playing up to a settler's daughter, out in the Valley, and claiming to be a farmer. He bought the farm out of his share of the loot, but he hired a man to do the work. Don't brace him, Jeff. He's a born gunfighter."

Jeff didn't seem to hear that advice. He said, as though thinking aloud, "Abbott, Dodson, Lowell. . . . All I want is time enough to send them to hell!"

He shook Amberton's hand, said, "I'll keep your name out of it, Frank," and went out.

Once on the street, Jeff leaned against the bank's hitch-rail and rolled a smoke. He had made the first move; he had learned the names of the men who had murdered his father and brothers. The next move would not be so easily accomplished. He could not simply hunt down his men, and pump bullets into them. That would be punishing murder with murder. He would have to get publicly acceptable proof of the destruction of the Keyhole, a thing that would be difficult to accomplish. He already had met Pete Lowell, a man who wouldn't confess to anything even under torture. Jeff knew men well enough to have seen the toughness in Lowell.

He glanced at the new hotel, and it bore a sign that read: *Abbott House.* Down-street was the honky-tonk, its red-lettered sign reading: *Dodson's Hall.* It occurred to Jeff that one or the other, Abbott or Dodson, might not be as tough as Pete Lowell. He headed for the honky-tonk.

CHAPTER IV

Jeff Starts His Job

IT WAS past midnight, and most of the town was dark and deserted. One of the smaller saloons was already closed, and Jeff saw the lights go out in another. But Dodson's Hall was busy and noisy, and before Jeff reached its batwings, a

group of riders came jogging into town and reined in before the honky-tonk. Jeff halted and eyed the riders, five in number, and he knew each of them.

Hanley, a rancher, who had been the Keyhole's nearest neighbor; Robert, Hanley's foreman; Tip and Jock Bolt, who'd raised horses back in the northern Jornadas; Old Len Matthews, who once had ridden for the Keyhole. Five hard-riding hombres, they'd been in the past. Now they were riding after midnight. Jeff knew the answer. The five were members of the White Hood band. But they'd left off their masks for an open visit to a saloon.

They left their mounts among the dozen or more others at the long hitch-rail, then strode into the saloon. If they had seen Jeff, they had given no sign. He followed them after a minute or two, and found them bellied up to the bar. A couple dozen other men were in the place, some townsmen but most were riders. None except two youngsters looked as if they were from farms, and they were sitting at a table with a couple of percentage girls. Two gambling tables were going, and watching one faro game was Pete Lowell.

Jeff wasn't too surprised to see the rocky-faced young hardcase. Having learned that a Keyes was still alive, Lowell would naturally have ridden to town to warn Dodson and Judge Abbott. Pete Lowell gave him a calculating look, and turned back to watch the faro dealing. One of the girls went up to Lowell, and slipped her arm through his. If Lowell had his eye on Laurie Howard, as Frank Amberton thought, it did not keep him from playing up to this girl. His arm dropped to her waist and stayed there.

Jeff went to the bar. "Where's Dodson?" he asked when the bartender came to serve him. The man replied, "That's the boss, at the far end."

Jeff walked down-bar to Dodson, a swarthy man with bright eyes and a thin-lipped mouth curled in a forced smile. He was dressed in the showy fashion affected by his kind. He eyed Jeff with interest but no uneasiness, and Jeff wondered if Pete Lowell had failed to tell Dodson about him. Jeff looked from Dodson to the back-bar mirror, seeking Lowell's reflection in it. He saw that the young hardcase had shoved the girl away from him, now, and no longer was interested in the faro game.

"Something on your mind, stranger?" Dodson asked.

"A lot, mister. I'm Jeff Keyes."

"So?"

"I've heard that you were a guerilla during the war."

"You could have heard wrong, Keyes," Dodson said. "Besides, the war is over and done with. Let's forget it."

Dodson kept his voice low, but Jeff had spoken out for everyone to hear. And the big room was suddenly hushed. Men had turned to watch and listen. Jeff glanced at the mirror again. Then he said, "I've forgotten the war, Dodson. But I'm not forgetting that a wild bunch calling themselves guerillas raided the Keyhole Ranch and killed my kinfolks. You deny you were one of the leaders of that wild bunch?"

"I do," the saloon owner said. "I came here after the war."

"You're a liar, Dodson."

"My word against yours, Keyes."

"We'll see," Jeff said, and hit him twice.

The first blow caught Dodson in the stomach, driving the breath out of him. The second crashed against his chin, rocking his head back. He hung against the bar, dazed, blood coming from his mouth. "Talk, Dodson," Jeff said. He hit him again as he reached inside his coat for a pocket gun. Jeff glanced at the mirror, grabbed Dodson and jerked the man around in front of him. Pete Lowell's shot caught Dodson in the back.

Jeff let loose of the hit man, and drew his own gun. But confusion broke out. The girls were shrieking, men were cursing. Everyone was milling about to get out of the way. A bartender pulled a shotgun from under the bar, levelled it toward Jeff. A house gun-guard drew and tried to throw down on him.

Trying to get a shot at Pete Lowell, Jeff would have been cut down had not Hanley and the four other riders taken a hand. They swung their weapons on the bartender and the house guard, and loudly warned them to do no shooting. Pete Lowell made it to the swing doors, and disappeared. By the time Jeff got outside, Lowell was riding out of town.

Hanley had followed Jeff, and he said, "Was that Pete Lowell a member of Dodson's wild bunch? If he was, he'll be taken care of. Don't you bother about

him, friend. You head for the Jornadas, and hole up there. You better rustle, now!"

"I'll take care of Lowell," Jeff said. "In my own way."

"Rats, man, you don't savvy. Dodson's dead. It wasn't your shot that killed him, but you pulled him in front of Lowell's gun. There's law in this town, nowadays, and if you're arrested, you'll come up for a trial that'll send you to the gallows. Dodson was a friend of Judge Ben Abbott, and that lawyer is a big man, the top dog. The town marshal is his man—and here comes Dutton now!"

Jeff saw a man running toward the honky-tonk. There was a law badge fastened to his shirt. Hanley shoved Jeff toward the hitch-rack, saying in a hoarse whisper, "Rustle, friend!"

Jeff's horse, however, was over by the bank. He headed for it as the lawman went into the honky-tonk. Mounting, Jeff put the town behind and left the road to cut across the flats toward the Jornadas. Pete Lowell could wait for another day. And so, too, could Judge Ben Abbott. Looking back to what had happened, Jeff was sourly amused that though he had forced Dodson to pay for the destruction of the Keyhole, it had been Pete Lowell's gun that had fired the fatal shot. It seemed a proper sort of pay-off, for one-third of the debt.

BACK at his place in the hills, Jeff bedded down in the clump of cottonwoods. He slept uneasily, but was not roused during the few hours that remained of the night. At sunup, he moved back into his cabin and built a fire to cook his breakfast. By the time he'd finished eating, he heard a rider approaching in a hurry. Taking up his rifle, he stepped to the doorway. Rud Hanley swung up on a lathered and blowing horse.

"You've got to pull out of here, Jeff," Hanley said. "There was a big meeting in town after Dodson was killed. Judge Abbott sent to Fort Benning for troops, claiming there's need for martial law here. A big posse under Dutton, the town marshal, is heading into the Jornadas to hunt you down. They've built up a case against you, Jeff. They claim Pete Lowell tried to keep you from beating Dodson to death, and you shoved Dodson right into Lowell's shot. You see how it's worked?"

"Sure. I expected that," Jeff said. "But why does Abbott want soldiers here?"

"To wipe out the White Hoods," Hanley said. "Abbott knows there's a showdown coming, and he aims to be on top when it comes off. It looks to me as though Abbott must be in on this deal. You had Dodson ready to admit that he was one of the leaders of that guerilla wild bunch, and Judge Abbott and he—and Pete Lowell, too—have always been thick as thieves!"

"You're right, Hanley. Abbott and Lowell were Dodson's *compadres* in that guerilla game. But you leave them to me."

"You're not the only one with a stake in this, Keyes!"

"Maybe not. But Abbott and Lowell are my game."

"They're too much for you," Hanley said, in a temper. "You were lucky last night, but such luck never holds. Saddle up and come with me, back to the Hoods' roost, so you'll be safe. You'll get all the fighting you want, riding with us. Like Judge Abbott figures, this is the showdown. His soldiers can't get here before things blow up!"

"What're you planning on doing, Hanley?"

"We're going to make one last big drive," Hanley said ringingly. "All us ranchers lost stock to the guerillas and rangeland to those sodbusting squatters. We're done holing up in the hills. We're taking back what's rightly ours. You coming with me, Keyes."

Jeff shook his head. "But thanks for the warning."

Hanley swore. "You're a stubborn fool!" he growled. "They'll catch you and put a rope around your neck, then you'll yell for the Hoods to come and save you. And it'll be too late!"

"S'long, Hanley."

"All right, Keyes," Hanley said flatly.

He rode on, heading north through the hills.

Jeff watched him out of sight, then got busy. He saddled his bay, packed grub and camp gear onto his pinto mare. He cached his stuff farther back in the hills, turned the mare loose. An hour later, hidden in the timber atop Crown Point, he watched a dozen riders come into his little valley from the south. And saw them set fire to his cabin.

CHAPTER V

Judge Abbott Has an Accident

THE posse wasted two hours in the valley, then headed on through the hills and finally was lost to Jeff's sight. He remained on Crown Point and spent as much time watching Keyhole Valley as the hills behind him. All through the morning, the farmers had been at work in their fields. At high noon, they went to their houses for their midday meal. Before they went back to work again, a horse and buggy appeared along the road. It stopped at each farmhouse, while the driver, without leaving the rig, called out each farmer. All Jeff could see of the driver was that he was huge, a tremendously fat man, but on a hunch he believed it was Judge Ben Abbott.

As the rig made its halting way up-valley, Jeff's curiosity got the better of him. He mounted and rode slowly down the steep hill. When he reached the valley floor, he rode along the edge of a field knee-deep with wheat. Beyond it was another field with corn just peeping through the earth. Finally he came to a truck garden beyond which were the Howard's farm buildings and house. Little Luke Howard was seated on a bench outside the kitchen, cleaning an old rifle.

"Howdy, Jeff," the farmer said. "Glad to see you again."

"How's the back, Luke?"

"Sore as blazes. Dinner's over, friend, but come inside and Laurie will give you a bite. Come on. I won't take 'no' for an answer!"

"I'm mighty hungry," Jeff said. "But Laurie won't like to feed me."

The girl appeared in the doorway, and said coldly, "I'd never turn down a hungry man, no matter what he is. You'll eat and you'll leave here. We've just heard what happened in town last night, and we don't want any killers here!"

She was not half so hardened as she pretended, and Jeff, seeing how lovely she was with the sun on her red-brown hair, grinned at her. He dismounted and washed up at the pump, then went inside. Laurie placed a full meal before him, then stood back and watched him as he ate. There was a woman's interest in her eyes, and Jeff could almost feel her curiosity. Luke sat at the opposite side of the table, still cleaning and oiling his rifle, and Jeff asked him what he was up to.

"Judge Abbott stopped by," the farmer said. "He's warning all the Valley settlers to be ready for trouble tonight. The Judge has a spy in the Hoodlums, and the spy reported that tonight's to be the showdown. We'll be ready, all right."

"Dad, don't tell too much," Laurie said. "There's no knowing who is a spy."

Jeff had finished his meal, and now he pushed back his chair. He grinned at the girl. "You mean I'm maybe a spy, Laurie?" he said. He was amused by her, and liked her more by the minute. "I couldn't spy on you, after such a fine meal. You're a good cook, Laurie. Too bad you're to marry Pete Lowell."

"Who said I'm to marry Pete?"

"I heard talk, in town."

"You heard wrong, Mr. Keyes. And I'll thank you not to repeat such gossip."

"I'm glad it's not so, Laurie," Jeff said. "Because Pete Lowell is a no-good." He heard a rig passing. "Is that Judge Abbott?"

Laurie glanced from the window. "Yes, it is," she replied. Then, turning, she saw Jeff's face harden. "You mean him harm, too! You—"

"Don't judge me without knowing all the evidence, Laurie," Jeff said. "Because of Abbott my father and brothers were murdered. Curt Dodson and Pete Lowell were leaders of the wild bunch that did the killing. I know what you're thinking—that I'm a gunman. But you don't understand how things are. This is Texas, and there's still no real law here. It's not a peaceful, law-abiding place like your Ohio."

There was more he wanted to say to Laurie Howard, things he wanted to tell her because he found her more desirable than any woman he'd ever looked upon. But her eyes were chill, hostile. He took up his hat and strode from the house. By the time he was mounted, Judge Abbott's rig was a mile down the valley.

Jeff swung the bay onto the road. "Come on, boy!"

He didn't want to lose this chance to face Judge Ben Abbott alone.

JUDGE ABBOTT had a big black in harness, and the animal would not be held in. Long before overtaking the rig, Jeff saw that the fat man wasn't much

of a hand with horses. It was not until they were through the pass and headed toward Blue Creek bridge that Jeff drew close. Abbott was aware of him at last, and darted a backward look. His bulbous face, with its beady eyes, wide mouth and wattled throat, made Jeff think of a frog.

"Pull up, Abbott! Pull up!"

Abbott knew him, guessed his identity. He grabbed up the buggy whip and lashed the black across the rump. It was like touching spark to powder. The black bolted. The rig began to pull away from Jeff. He touched spurs to his bay. He was close, no more than twenty feet behind, when the fat man flung away his whip and twisted about with a derringer in his hand. His shot went wild; he'd had little chance of hitting his target, for he was being jounced around by the lurching, bumping buggy. Jeff drew his pistol, but did not fire. He didn't need to shoot.

The road took a sharp bend that led to the wooden bridge. Horse, buggy, and fat man went careening around the curve. The black tried to straighten out to take the narrow span, but the buggy crashed against the low guard-rail. There was an explosive splintering of wooden wheel spokes. Jeff, jerking his bay to a quick stop, saw Abbott catapulted from the buggy and over the rail.

All in the space of a heartbeat, the fat man was gone from sight. He shrieked during his fall, then was abruptly silent. The black raced on, dragging the wrecked vehicle after him.

Jeff swung close and looked down. It was a fifty-foot drop, and rocks jutted from the creek. Abbott had struck the rocks, and now, as Jeff watched, his huge body slid off into the water. And sank like a stone.

For a long time, Jeff sat watching the water boil around the rocks. He had no second glimpse of Abbott. At last he shuddered and took up the slack in his reins. Looking up, he saw a horseback on the road beyond the bridge. It was the banker, Frank Amberton.

"He's gone, Jeff?"

Amberton came on, walking his horse over the bridge. His florid face was grave, but Jeff detected a pleased look in his eyes.

"Dodson and Abbott," Amberton said. "Now there's only Pete Lowell."

"His time will come, Frank. The cards are stacked against the three of them. Is Lowell with that posse that's hunting me?"

"He is. And he'll find you."

"I want him to find me, Frank."

"He's a mad dog, with a gun, Jeff. And you've got him aroused," Amberton said. "But maybe you're right. Maybe luck's with you. I came out here hoping to contact the White Hoods. They've got to be warned, Jeff. Abbott sent for soldiers, and two troops of cavalry will reach Crossroads before dark."

"The Hoods already know," Jeff said. "I talked to one of them, early this morning. He brought me word of the posse. But all hell's going to break out tonight, Frank. Abbott had a report from a spy he placed in the Hoods. That outfit's going to make a clean-up raid against the settlers, but Abbott warned them and they're getting ready to put up a fight. It'll be a battle—a blasted bloody one!"

"That's all to your benefit, Jeff."

"How so?"

"If the Hoods can drive out the settlers, you'll get back the Keyhole."

Jeff shook his head. "I don't want the Keyhole, if it's got to be bought back in blood. I came home to find the men who killed by father and brothers, and once I've finished with Pete Lowell that'll be done. I'm coming to your bank for my seven thousand dollars, then, Frank, and ride out. I'm going to head for another town, buy a trail outfit and some longhorns and drive for the Staked Plains to start a new ranch."

"That's buffalo country, Jeff. And Indian country."

"Cattle can live where buffalo live," Jeff replied. "And I'll take my chances with the Indians. You have my money ready. I have a feeling my business with Pete Lowell will be finished tonight. And another thing, Frank; you better send those soldiers out of the Valley as soon as they show up. Once they're here, the Hoods will realize a raid will do them no good."

Amberton eyed him narrowly. "What's got into you, Jeff? The Hoods are cattlemen, like yourself, and you've turned against them!"

"You're wrong, Frank," Jeff said heavily. "It's just that I've seen too much of war and killing. It's one thing to hunt down murderers, and another for

ranchers and sodbusters to kill each other. The settlers came here innocently enough, and they're decent folk. Because of Abbott and Dodson and Lowell, the ranchers lost out. The farmers shouldn't have to pay for the crookedness of those three. Besides, Frank, if the Hoods attack, they're liable to be wiped out. The farmers are warned and armed. They'll be forted up. You see? The Hoods are bound to lose out. Once they realize bloodshed won't pay, they'll do as I plan to do, pull out for new rangeland.'

"Maybe you're right, Jeff," Amberton said slowly. "I'll send the troops to the Valley. And I'll have your money ready. I wish you luck."

"S'long, Frank," Jeff replied. "I'll be up on Crown Point, watching the Valley for Pete Lowell to show up."

He swung away. Looking back, he saw that Frank Amberton was heading for town.

CHAPTER VI

"Westward the Course"

LATE in the afternoon, Jeff saw the posse come along the valley road from the north. After a fruitless search, they evidently had grown tired of riding through the hills and were taking the easiest way back to town. The distance was too great for Jeff to identify any of the dozen riders, but one man dropped off at the farm nearest the Howard place. And Jeff knew that he was Pete Lowell.

Controlling an impulse to ride immediately down and face Lowell, Jeff knew it would be best to wait until dark. If Pete Lowell was as expert a gunman as Frank Amberton thought, he wouldn't be caught off guard at any time. And in broad daylight, he would drop a man hunting him before that man could cross the fields surrounding his place. So Jeff reasoned, and forced himself to be patient. He was well aware that he would not be as lucky with Pete Lowell as he had been with Dodson and Judge Abbott. That was too much to expect.

The afternoon hours dragged, but finally the sun was nearly down. Jeff saddled his bay, checked his pistol and his saddle carbine. He gave the Valley a final survey, and frowned at what he saw. The Valley farmers were preparing for the expected raid by the White Hoods. The men and older boys, all carrying rifles, were gathering at Pete Lowell's farm. The women and younger children hurried to the Howard farm. To Jeff's eyes, it was a sad and courageous thing. Sad, because people had to face such trouble. Courageous, because they faced it without hysteria.

From his vantage point, Jeff followed the road with his gaze. He could see the pass in the hills, and Blue Creek bridge where Judge Abbott had fallen to his death. He could see the road wind on and on. Crossroads was a dozen miles away, beyond his sight, but no blue-uniformed riders were on the road. The cavalry that could have kept trouble away was slow in coming.

Jeff next surveyed the hills, and the little valleys that lay between them. In the fading light, he saw riders top a low hill three miles away. Hooded riders, a score of them. The band was riding fast, heading toward the valley, and minutes would bring them down onto the farmland.

Jeff wasted a couple minutes watching, then he forgot Pete Lowell. He ran to his horse, swung to the saddle, headed down the east side of Crown Point. It was in his mind to reach the band, to appeal to them. Jeff was sure he could make them see reason, make them understand that the raid they planned was not only foolhardy but criminal as well. But even before he was down the long slope, he knew the band couldn't be overtaken. The hooded riders were already too close to the valley.

The raiders struck through the thickening dusk, hitting first the farm farthest north. Flames blossomed. Farmhouse, barn and outbuildings were set afire, and a red glow spread across the darkening sky. The hooded riders rode on to the next farm, boldly lighting their way with torches. They rode silently, not shouting or needlessly firing their guns. They were still far from Pete Lowell's farm, where the defenders were forted up. So much of it Jeff Keyes saw as he dropped down from the hills.

He reined in at the edge of Luke Howard's wheat field, not knowing what part he could play in this tragedy. There was no stopping the raiders now. Jeff knew they'd shoot him down if he crossed their path. He remembered the women and children—including Laurie Howard—who were at the Howard farm,

and realized the danger that would threaten them if the raiders got that far. He kneed his bay and rode through the wheat.

The raiders split into three groups, two to strike at two undefended farms and the third riding for the Lowell place. The crash of guns came like thunder, and the fiery night echoed the shouts and curses and screams of fighting men. The first group of Hoods reeled back, leaving dead and wounded, but the others came riding to reinforce them. The gunfire grew heavier, and the raiders encircled and besieged the Lowell buildings. Jeff saw a small group of riders tear along the road toward the Howard farm, their torches uplifted like banners, and he went to head them off.

THEY reached the farmhouse ahead of him, and a flaming brand went crashing through a window. Jeff could hear women scream and children cry. He rode squarely at the hooded riders, cursing them, yelling at them, "There's women and children in there, you fools!"

Their guns were turned on him, and for a moment Jeff thought that they would shoot him out of the saddle. Then one said, "All right, Keyes, all right!" They swung their mounts and rode on, toward the next farm. The interior of Luke Howard's house was redly bright. Women and children came running out as Jeff shouted, "Clear out! Everybody clear out!"

He dismounted and forced his way past the panicky, fleeing people. The parlor was aflame, and at first he thought everyone had escaped from there. Then he saw Laurie Howard through the smoke and flames. She was trying to drag a fainting woman from the room. He crossed to her.

"Laurie, save yourself!"

He picked up the unconscious woman and carried her from the flames. He laid her on the ground, well back from the burning house. The others were huddled together in a group. The women were silent now, but some of the children still whimpered. A mile away, at Lowell's farm, the guns were still blasting, and the bright red glow lay across the whole valley.

Laurie came to Jeff. She was pale, and certainly frightened. But she had full control of herself. "I heard you try to stop the Hoodlums," she said. "I've been wrong about you, and I'm glad."

"I didn't want this to happen, Laurie."

"It had to come," the girl said dully. "When there's hate, violence always comes. But how will it end?"

Jeff shook his head. He thought, "If those troops would only come!" The thought brought on the idea, and he caught Laurie by the arm. "A flour sack, Laurie. Do you have one?"

"Several, Jeff. On the clothesline back of the house. I just washed them today. I'll get one."

He went with her, leading his horse. When Laurie brought him one of the sacks, he took out his knife and cut eye-holes in it. He removed his broad-brimmed hat and handed it to the girl. He mounted and pulled the sack over his head. He could see fairly well through the eye-holes. His horse was skittish, shying away from the burning house.

"I'll try to stop it, Laurie," he said. "If I get away with this, I'll be back."

He swung the bay about, took to the road, headed toward Lowell's farm. He came upon two hooded men holding a dozen mounts, while the others fought afoot and from cover. He shouted at the pair, "Soldiers! Cavalry—coming through the pass!"

He raced on, saw half a dozen figures firing from behind an overturned farm wagon. "Soldiers. Clear out!"

He went on, repeating his fake warning, and by the time he'd made a complete circle the Hoods were taking to their horses. The firing lightened, and at last only the men inside Lowell's house and barn were shooting. The hooded riders headed for the hills. Jeff pulled off his mask, flung it away and rode back toward the Howard place.

Drawing close, he saw a rider with a spare horse in the yard before the fire-swept house. He was jolted when he saw that the rider was Pete Lowell. He had thought the young gunman was forted up with the other farmers. Lowell was leaning from the saddle, talking to Laurie. He had hold of the girl's wrist, and, angry and profane, was urging her to mount the extra horse.

"Let go of me, Pete!" Laurie said furiously. "I'm not leaving with you, no matter how this ends. You deserted my father and the others. You promised to stand by them, then you sneaked away before the shooting started.

You're cowardly, Pete, and worse!"

Jeff had reined in twenty feet away. Now he gripped the butt of his holstered pistol. "Take your hands off her, Pete," he called. "You're not going anywhere —not even alone!"

He had looked ahead to this with some uneasiness, but now that the moment had come he found himself cool and steady enough. It was Pete Lowell, caught off guard because of the girl, who became rattled. He let go of Laurie, straightened in the saddle, kicked spurs to his horse. As the animal bolted, Pete drew his gun. Jeff matched his movement, and the two shots rang out together. It was Pete Lowell, foolishly trying a shot from a running, bucking mount, who missed. He tried a second shot, but Jeff's bullet was in him and he was already a dying man. He was thrown from his pitching horse, and when he hit the ground he did not move again.

IT WAS close to midnight before the cavalry came. By then, peace had come to Keyhole Valley. There were dead and wounded and burned out farms, but there could be no doubt that the White Hoods were at last convinced of the foolhardiness of their night riding. During the following two days, the soldiers scouted through the Jornadas but took none of the masked band prisoners. Like Jeff Keyes, the ranchers had discarded their flour-sack masks for good and scattered to find a new range where, ironically, they would be settlers.

Jeff Keyes slipped into Crossroads that same night, long after midnight, and got his seven thousand dollars from Frank Amberton. The banker told Jeff that he would testify in his favor if the law ever took steps to indict him for the deaths of Curt Dodson, Judge Ben Abbott and Pete Lowell.

"But you've got nothing to worry about," Amberton said, as they shook hands in good-by.

By daylight, Jeff was back in the Jornadas. He caught up his pinto mare, packed his cached grub and camp gear. An hour later, he rode up to the Howard farm. Luke Howard was already clearing away the debris of his burned house, and Laurie was busy making breakfast at a hastily built outdoor fireplace.

"You're just in time for breakfast, Jeff," Laurie said.

"I ate, back in the hills," Jeff told her. "I've no time to stop, even for your good cooking."

"You're leaving?" the girl said, disappointment in her voice. "But why in such a hurry?"

"The sooner I leave, the sooner I'll be back," Jeff explained. "And when I come back, Laurie, it will only be to take you away."

Laurie's disappointment faded, was replaced with pleasure. "Yes, hurry, Jeff," she said softly. "Don't make it too long a wait."

They smiled at each other, then Jeff Keyes rode north from the valley and started his search for a new range. On the way, he would pick up a couple of good hands. He would buy a wagon, and what gear he needed, and a foundation herd of longhorns. And when he found his ranch site, he'd build a cabin right away. Shelter was one of the basic needs of a man, especially when he planned to share his life with a woman. So Jeff Keyes told himself, riding on.

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Somewhere behind Craven in the frozen wastes, a Mountie was trailing him

PANIC

By C. V. TENCH

Because of the black fox Craven could not trap, he hated Jake Dennison and was heading for Carcajou Bend—ready to fight!

CRAVEN wanted to fight. His whole being was afire with a maniacal urge to smash and pound and throttle.

He had been drinking heavily since the night before, when he had arrived at the northern outpost of Carcajou Bend from his trapping grounds which lay four days' mush to the west. Now, seated in his room in the settlement's one stopping-house, he had reached that critical stage of intoxication that usually precedes a fight or a spell of maudlin weeping.

Craven didn't want to weep—he wanted to fight—and the man he wished to feel within the clutches of his huge hands was Jake Dennison, who owned and operated the post's one general store.

Craven's grievance against Dennison was but a trifling one, but months of solitary brooding about the matter had

caused it to grow altogether out of proportion until it had become a canker in his soul.

The whole trouble centered about a black or pole fox.

Back along in the middle of January, some three months before, Craven had sighted that which all trappers dream about—a black fox, standing motionless and within easy rifle range. It was the chance of a lifetime. Sheer luck!

Craven had raised his rifle. He had drawn a dead bead on the animal's head and pressed the trigger.

There had followed only a click!

But that faint click had been sufficient. Seemingly with but one motion the fox had cocked its ears, turned its head and sighted Craven, then raced away, before the incensed Craven could eject the faulty cartridge and lever another one into the breech.

And as the fox ran, Craven saw that which assured him that neither he nor any other man would ever be able to trap that particular fox, for the beast loped away on three legs!

And that three-legged run explained that at some time or other the animal had been caught in a trap. Somehow it had twisted free, forever after to be too cunning to be trapped.

Craven had then stormed and cursed for minutes, had picked up the faulty cartridge and hurled it from him—later to retrieve it and examine it carefully, night after night, in the solitude of his shack.

JAKE DENNISON had sold him that particular cartridge. It never entered Craven's head that in spite of the most rigid tests and inspections faulty cartridges are occasionally turned out. He placed the whole blame upon the storekeeper. As soon as the season was ended he would mush into Carcajou Bend and have it out with Jake Dennison.

He took another drink.

"The crook"—and he described the storekeeper in lurid and forceful oaths—"sold me some old stock; maybe some shells what had been condemned and what he bought cheap. Loses me a black fox."

He ceased his growling and glared around the small room now filling with the shadows of late afternoon, with red-veined eyes. Reaching for another drink he found the bottle was empty. Craven threw it crashing on the floor and rose to his feet.

"Going to have it out with him," he growled, "the dirty—"

Craven swayed along the corridor, down the stairs and through the men in the lobby towards the door, his eyes fixed unwinkingly straight ahead. The blast of cold air that greeted him as he went outside cut through him, cleared his head a little. He braced himself on the slippery icy path that ran along in front of the few buildings and followed it towards Dennison's store. Dennison himself got up from his seat by the stove and glanced at him inquiringly.

One glance assured Craven that they were alone in the building.

He stopped squarely, although not very firmly in the middle of the room as Dennison, seeing his condition, backed away. Dennison was old and thin and frail, while Craven bulked huge.

"Want to talk to you," he flung at the storekeeper. "You're crooked. Sell dud shells. Lost me a black fox."

"Hey?" Dennison asked in his high, cracked voice. "What d'you mean?"

Reaching out, Craven shook Dennison's slight figure until his ancient bones fairly rattled.

"Listen," he raved. "Either you pay me for that fox or I'll tear you apart."

Dennison knew men and was not without courage.

"You big oaf!" he snapped, wriggling free. "You've been drinking! You're talking wild! I bet you imagined all this. You'd better quit living alone and move into town."

"Imagined it, eh?" roared Craven. "Why, blast you!" He lunged forward with two huge hands extended to clutch the storekeeper's skinny windpipe. With a shrill cackle of fear Dennison dodged and started for the door. The old man's fear in some incomprehensible way convinced Craven of his guilt.

His hands shot forward and clutched Dennison about the waist. He tensed huge muscles and heaved, curving backwards. Dennison's body described an arc in the air above Craven's head and crashed against the glowing potbelly stove.

Craven wheeled.

"God!" he whispered, staring down in transfixed horror. "He's dead! I've killed him!"

He forced himself to make sure. When he straightened up his skin was clammy with cold sweat. Dennison was stone dead, his skull split.

Craven stepped back into the shadows of the big room and tried to think. The nearest Mounted Police post was at Peel Point, a day's journey away.

"That gives me two days," Craven whispered hollowly to the empty store, "before Corporal Brainard'll be on my trail. They've got to fetch him first."

He stared down again at Dennison's lifeless form and panic engulfed him.

AS CRAVEN mushed along, driving his dogs mercilessly, he was seeing in his mind's eye a relentless figure trailing him. The thought increased his panic, for he knew Corporal Brainard, knew him to be a tireless manhunter.

The fact that he must have at least two or three days' start did not ease his fears. He knew the reputation of the Mounted. True, there were those who scoffed at that reputation, said it was all a lot of nonsense. But Craven, like all men who knew intimately of the Mounted Police and their work, knew that it was true.

The Mounted never give up! Positively no excuse is accepted for failure. Once they set out to track a man down they hang on until they either catch their quarry or, that most rare of all things, the hunted man is able to disappear utterly and for all time, leaving no vestige of a trace behind him.

Craven had never heard of such a case —excepting where the wanted man had committed suicide or met his death in some other way. Craven did not intend to commit suicide or to die, in some other way he must sever the trail between himself and the policeman he felt sure was even now on his track. But how?

Now and again he glanced backward along the trail, a ribbon of marred snow that showed clearly the route he had taken. A tangible link connecting him with Dennison's sudden death. It was because of that plain trail that the panic gnawing within his breast became stronger.

Another day he mushed along, and now he was praying that it would snow. A blizzard would smother his trail and give him a chance to swing away towards the mountains a short day's travel on his right. On the other side was Alaska, and, he hoped, comparative safety. He had plenty of food on his load and given the chance of a blinding storm and darkness he could make up a packsack, turn loose his dogs and head across the mountains afoot. A desperate expedient, but the only way to shake the policeman he felt was plugging along not so many miles behind him.

A storm! A blizzard that would blanket the whole countryside and baffle any man who sought to follow his trail.

In that event, then Corporal Brainard would keep right on—Craven felt sure of that—would continue along the main trail trusting to luck to again pick up the tracks of the man he sought. Instead —and Craven grinned mirthlessly through frost-rimmed lips — he would be slogging it across the mountains. And then perhaps, if Brainard found his dogs, he would conclude that Craven had become lost in the blizzard and so give up the hunt.

And then Craven suddenly sniffed the wind, stared at the sky. There was no doubt about it, he smelt snow. Hope commenced to subdue the wild panic in his breast as he watched huge, billowing, yellow-tinted clouds surging up from the horizon.

Quietly, very gently at first, the snow commenced to fall, and to Craven each tiny flake that touched his bristly face was as the caress of freedom. He looked back at the trail. Already it was being blotted out by the whirling snow, in another hour it would be hidden completely.

He halted his dogs and commenced hurried preparations to set out on foot. With practiced ease he threw together a packsack of sleeping-bag and food; axe, frying pan and coffee pot that was as nothing to his giant strength when he had lashed it upon his shoulders. He ripped the harness from the dogs and scattered the remainder of the food among them. Without questioning this unexpected feast they flung themselves upon the food in a fighting, snarling mob.

Straightening up, rifle in hand, Craven shook the weapon towards where he thought Corporal Brainard would be. "Come on!" he challenged. "Trail me now—if you can!"

He strode away towards the mountains, leaning with a fierce sort of pleas-

ure against the buffeting wind, drawing in deep, powerful breaths of tingling air. He was now leaving no trail behind.

He kept on and on, glorying in his strength that even the now fierce blizzard could not weaken. It was a storm that would have made short work of a greenhorn, but Craven was an experienced northerner. He had been filled with panic when leaving that broad trail for Corporal Brainard to follow, but he was not afraid of the elements.

It was still snowing when he camped that night. After a hearty meal he crawled into his sleeping-bag and dropped off, to sleep quite content.

WHEN he awoke it was still dark, but dawn was imminent and, although the wind had died down and it had ceased to snow, the inches-thick white blanket told him that it had snowed well on into the night. And there was not the slightest trace of his trail leading up to his camp-side at the foot of the mountains.

He cooked and ate breakfast. Let Corporal Brainard or anyone else try to find him now!

The meal ended, he commenced the arduous climb over the mountains, swinging his snowshoes with new strength and confidence in his stride. With the coming of daylight the wind again got up and more snow commenced to fall, hiding his trail as fast as he made it.

At noon he halted long enough to boil a billy of coffee and to bolt a slab of bannock, then again lashed on his webs and resumed his climb.

Mid-afternoon found him toiling up a great slope almost at the timber-line. Below him and to his right yawned a huge chasm. Above him towered the peak he must skirt to reach the valley beyond. All about him the world was white, silent, motionless and cold.

Stark panic had driven him to this remote spot untraveled by man and inhabited only by the wild things. But Craven gave no heed to that. By attempting the almost impossible, by trying to make it afoot over the mountains in a storm, he felt that he had rid himself for all time of the ones who would bring him to account for his crime.

As he halted for a moment to rest, the wind and snow eased up for a space and a deathly lull settled about everything. He stared back down the way he had come and, as he thought of Corporal Brainard, a great roaring, full-lunged laugh burst from him.

The sound shattered the stillness and disturbed something. A flock of ptarmigan fluttered from one clump of shrub to another. In an instant, rifle ready, Craven was stealing up on the birds. Fresh meat! Only a man who has lived for days on bacon and hardtack can know how the mere sight of fresh meat can flood a man with desire that causes him to forget all else.

Slowly, cautiously, scarce daring to breathe, Craven stole up upon the covey. In their white winter plumage the birds were indistinguishable against the snow. And then one moved—very slightly, but it was enough. Craven fired and the bird became a mass of fluttering feathers, even as its companions whirred away.

In his eagerness to retrieve the bird, Craven did not hear something else; did not hear the roar which sounded even above the whip-like crack of the rifle.

Above him a concussion jolted the mountainside, a terrific echo to the rifle shot. Down came the slide—gently at first—so far away it was barely discernible. A mass of ice and snow already weakened by early spring thaws and awaiting only some such small shock as the reverberations of a rifle shot to start it.

The slide gathered way. Bristling with root-torn trees it thundered down the slope.

And now Craven heard. Bird in one hand, rifle in the other he stared upward, and such mortal terror as he had never known filled him. Forgotten was his crime, forgotten was Corporal Brainard, he was in terrible danger of his life.

Panic-stricken, he turned to run. He stumbled and fell and then the avalanche was upon him. He was tossed whirling in the air, and fell back into the grinding chaos even as the whole mass roared and thundered its way over the cliff and down, down, down.

He left no trail behind.

IN THE Mounted Police post at Peel Point, Corporal Brainard was swearing softly as he labored over his monthly report sheets: Among other items he wrote:

"I also beg to report the death of a man named Jake Dennison (elderly;

exact age unknown), who owned and operated a general store at the settlement known as Carcajou Bend.

"On receiving word of this man's death followed the usual procedure of thorough investigation. The body had been removed to the living-room when I arrived, but my own investigations, coupled with the information given to me by residents who first discovered the death (their signed statements enclosed) caused me to arrive at the following conclusions:

"The deceased, who was both old and in indifferent health, had been standing or sitting close to the stove in his store when he either fainted or had a heart seizure. In falling he struck his head heavily against the stove, occasioning a severe head wound that, either in itself was the direct cause of death, or, he may have been dead of heart failure before striking the stove.

"In any event I am satisfied that he was not the victim of foul play, because: (a) he had no known enemies; (b) nothing had been stolen from the store, even though in the safe, which was not locked, was a large sum in currency (enclosed); (c) there was not the slightest evidence of foul play.

"I shall have the body properly interred at Carcajou Bend as soon as the frost is out of the ground sufficiently to permit the digging of a grave."

With a sigh of relief Corporal Brainard laid down his pen and leaned back in his chair.

"And that," he said aloud, "is that. Not one crime committed in my district all this winter."

He knew nothing of Craven, whose body lay buried beneath tons of debris. Craven, the man who had become the victim of panic!

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

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A Novelet of the Southwest

By NELS LEROY JORGENSEN

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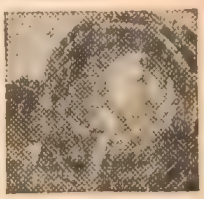

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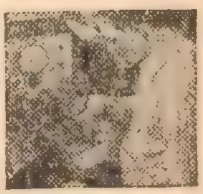

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THE HOME CORRAL

(Continued from page 10)

ing is about twice that of normal times. Most new homes are mortgaged to the hilt.

Housing, Fresh Air Style

Education? Public schools in many cities are seriously over-crowded and there's a teacher scarcity. Enrollments are full up at colleges and universities. One suburban town, about one hour away from an educational center, has turned its municipal stadium into a trailer village for veteran students, who are required to have a place to live before they can enroll.

"We're at our rope's end," a discouraged Buffalo couple told me the other day. "We came to California ten days ago with a brand-new automobile and house trailer, because we'd heard about the housing shortage. We want to go to work and settle down, but all we could get is a camp 40 miles away from L.A., where we pay $2 a day rental. We can't find a thing closer in. We'd sell the whole she-bang and take a train back to Buffalo if it wasn't for those hard winters and my wife's health. What'll we do?"

"Grease up your hitch, brother," I told the man. "Have a look at the West, the real West, before you give up. Find a small town, 200 miles or more away from any big, crowded city!"

They did. They found what they wanted and were busy and happy, last I heard. Near a hustling small town that had every advantage of a big place with hardly any of its drawbacks.

Small Towns Need Folks

The point of the whole thing, hombres and hombresses, is that out West there are thousands of small towns that need new folks. You hear about the big places because they're well-advertised. But the small places aren't advertised at all, as a rule. Towns from 50,000 population down to hamlets of 200 inhabitants offer a fuller life than the cities.

Folks are friendlier in the small places. Land is cheaper so the average worker can afford enough ground to grow things, if he's inclined that way, to take the pressure off high food prices. There's wholesome outdoor diversion, including fishing and hunting which is nearly every normal man's

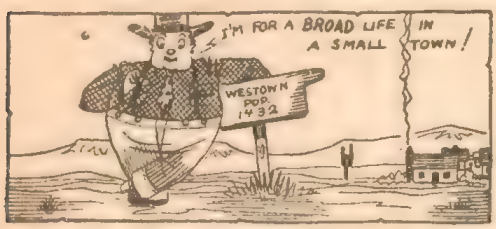
dreams, free and close at hand. Rents are lower and living more economical generally.

To get back to the big city we've used as an illustration, oldtime residents are trying to escape from Los Angeles and its "growing pains" even while eager strangers pile in. On my advice a couple with a month-old baby took a week off, scouted around, and found a town to their liking about 800 miles away. They're making plans to pull stakes and settle there.

Now this isn't a knock against any city. It's a favor to everybody to turn the stampede in a better direction. And men a heap wiser than I am are preaching "decentralization." The day of the small town is here, they say, where the strain of modern living is not so great and folks are likely to find happier, healthier lives.

Lots of big city folks have the notion that anywhere outside a big city is "country." And that they'd be called upon to apologize for living in a "jaytown."

It's bound to be that some of these are incurable, hopeless "cityfied human fractions" who would never be happy anywhere else. But not all of them. Some of the happiest small-town folks I know are refugees from big cities. They lived and worked in New York, Chicago, Detroit, Kansas City and other metropolises where one downtown office district of a few blocks swarms with more humanity than all of Nevada, or Utah, or Arizona or New Mexico, or of great, unpeopled parts of Oregon, Washington, Idaho and others of the 11 Western States.



Life in the Country

Even country life has the benefits of civilization on a larger scale than it used to have. There are scores of small Western ranch communities with good roads, electricity, modern district schools, prosperous churches and shopping centers really closer at hand, in a matter of time, than such places are to

[*Turn page*]

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many traffic-bound, crowd-locked city dwellers. Better to live a broad life in a little place than a narrow life in a big place. A lot of home-hungry folks are finding that out. A lot more would if they knew the facts.

Except for certain specialized lines of work and some professions, the opportunity for income is just as good in the small town as in the big city. And the opportunity for security is far greater.

That's my honest advice, hombres and hombresses. If you've got any questions I haven't covered, write in and if you enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope I'll give you a quick answer. A good thing to remember is that The Home Corral isn't trying to sell you anything nor is it hooked up with anybody that is. The only object is to interest you. And to invite you to our next get-together here in POPULAR WESTERN Magazine, where you'll find some more up-to-date facts about the West.

—DOC LONG TRAIL

OUR NEXT ISSUE

THE thing that was taking place in the valley was no concern of his. In fact, he knew that to be anywhere in the vicinity of the action made it only harder for him. So, trail-wise and careful, Jim Hardesty crouched there in the dark, a six-gun nestled in one hand, free palm covering the soft nose of the buckskin, and watched.

The valley, so innocent an hour before, when he had started to cross it, had become alive with moving, menacing ghost riders. Dark riders who even among themselves spoke seldom—faceless men.

With an opening like that, a situation like that, you'd go on reading, wouldn't you? Sure you would. So would anyone who likes a good Western yarn. Well, the whole smashing novelet that follows after this tense night scene of menace and suspense is contained in the next issue of POPULAR WESTERN. It's by Nels Leroy Jorgensen, and it's titled OWLHOOT GLEAM FOR A RUSTED STAR.

Get it? When a lawman's star gathered rust, out there on the tough, raw frontier, in the long-gone days, it meant just what the same thing means today—neglect of duty, failure to measure up to responsibility—or downright crooked alliance with the owlhoot gentry.

In this story, the sheriff was Blake Hardesty, and Blake was Jim's brother. And Jim, lying low there in the dark of the night, be-

gan to wonder if there wasn't rust on Blake's star. As Jorgensen says:

Once Jim Hardesty froze. From time to time the wind made a little shift and there was a moment when he would have been willing to swear he was listening to a voice he knew well—his brother's voice. But that must be a mistake, he knew. Certainly Blake Hardesty, sheriff of Cherokee, would not be night riding. And yet the uneasiness persisted.

Of course, Jorgensen explains, there was no question what those fellows were doing, down there in the dark of the valley. They had gathered a sizeable herd of range stock —more than three hundred head, if he could judge from the sound of it and the shadowy appearance of it.

But these half dozen riders were not acting like typical rustlers. They didn't seem to care how much noise they made, and there was no real effort at concealment of their illegal activities. The stock they were moving must be Hourglass stock, and they were moving it off Mark O'Loughlin's Hourglass range. And who was O'Loughlin? Well—

All the way north, Jim had been hearing tales of Mark O'Loughlin, the new owner of the Hourglass and reputedly the strongest man in the valley. This O'Loughlin had come to the Cherokee Wells strip since Jim Hardesty's time, and he had made a reputation for ruthlessness, hardness and all lack of compromise. Yet—

O'Loughlin, from all that Hardesty had been able to learn, was more than capable of taking care of his own stock. Thus, if these cows that were being run off under a clouded moon were his cows, that was his affair. His—and that of the pack of out-of-the-state gunslingers that rumor claimed he used for his hands.

Jim Hardesty, Jorgensen tells us, had been down in Mexico for some eighteen months, riding with a band of rebels under "Pulque" Morales, who had been trying to set up a new state government in Durango. When Morales was shot out of his saddle, the cause died with him, and his men scattered.

So now Jim was home—with the brand of a long rider upon him. But he would have come anyway, because he had been hearing stories of the sinister doings in Cherokee Wells, and because—

Jim Hardesty and his older brother, Blake, shared a heritage between them. When this valley had been raw and untamed,

[*Turn page*]

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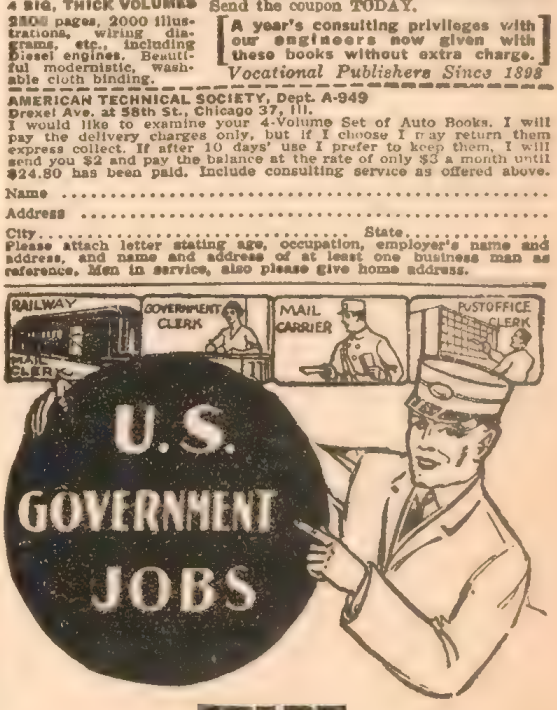

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their father had brought law into it. Bart Hardesty, the father, had been the first sheriff here, and under his smoking guns and cold rigor a frontier had developed into a civilized community.

The tradition had always meant a lot.

Anyway, Jim Hardesty was home again—if you could call it "coming home" to ride in with something like a price on your head. And, hunkered down there in the dark as the rustlers began to move the gathered herd southward, he heard shooting. He couldn't see what—or who—took the slugs, but he had a suspicion that some man had died down there.

But in the morning he found no dead man. Blood, yes, but no dead man—only a dead calf on which the brand showed signs of tampering. Jim was ravenous, and he cooked some of the calf. He was eating when Deputy Sheriff Art Caffrey—Blake's deputy—got the drop on him. To quote from the story:

Hardesty couldn't get away, but he was holed up and Caffrey couldn't come in after him, so he told Caffrey:

"I can sit this out if you can. What's the general idea, anyhow?"

"We don't need to palaver," Caffrey flung back. "We both know. Hourglass cows run off last night, one dead right here in front of my own eyes—one Hourglass rider shot and liable to die before sundown. Cherokee'd like to know who this stranger is—you—and I aim to show 'em."

"Where's the sheriff?" Jim called back after he had taken a moment to digest this information. A man *had* been shot then, the night before!

"He'll be along. Right pronto. That's something else for you to be thinkin' on, waddy. I'm jest holin' yuh up, maybe—but two men can smoke yuh out of there right easy. Comin' now?"

"I'll check in here till the sheriff comes," Jim drawled. "I haven't been back on this range a long time, but from what I've seen of the way the law is handled, I reckon that might be the best bet." He grinned tightly. "Unless you just had a few chaws of puma meat, Mister Caffrey, and feel like comin' after me yoreself!"

"I can wait," came from the unseen lawman grimly.

Jim Hardesty said, up into the sky, "How come you're out this way today, anyhow. Why the *pasear* in this direction?"

"Don't you know?"

"I mostly have had to make guesses, so far."

"And you wasn't in that raid last night?" A chuckle.

"I wasn't, but I certainly had a plush-lined box seat for it," Jim drawled. "What happened?"

"You wouldn't know, o' course!" the other snorted. "Three herds picked up—and just before roundup. Hourglass, Slash Seven and the Broken Arrow. Nothing beside that—much. You comin'?"

"No. How about the hombre you tell me was hit?"

"Liscomb—rides for O'Loughlin—that's if you don't know. He's pretty sure to die, so the doc says. O'Loughlin come in early and reported what happened. I rode this way. Looks like my hunch was good. Some one of yore gang knows how to find the way to Blind Dog Pass—and maybe it's you! That makes you valuable!"

Blind Dog Pass! Hombres and gals, that sinister route across the Border plays a big part in this story. What happened there is graphically told in OWLHOOT GLEAM FOR A RUSTED STAR, in our next issue. Look forward to this humdinger of a yarn, packed with action!

In the same issue you'll find one of the best novelets it's ever been our good fortune to bring you. It's THE DISTANT GUNS, by Wayne D. Overholser, and here is how it opens:

The guns of Gettysburg were silent, but their echoes had run the width of the continent to the Pacific, there to die among the timbered hills. Some who heard gave thanks. Many were indifferent. And there was a militant minority that, despite the defeat, went on with its treasonable plotting. It was

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this scheming which brought Bill Smith, Federal agent, back to Oregon.

The Copperheads were working out there—a dangerous, undercover crowd intent on taking the Pacific Coast out of the Union, and feeling that in this effort the South, which was fighting the Union bonds, was a natural ally.

Smith had been in Salem only a few minutes when things began to happen. There was the girl in the stage station. So lovely that—Bill left the stage office inwardly disturbed and mentally cursing himself for it. Too much depended on his mission here for him to be distracted by a pretty woman. Besides, he knew from experience that not all Copperhead spies were men.

This beautiful girl, the author hints, could be a spy—on the other side—and hence a deadly dangerous enemy of one Bill Smith.

And then Smith ran into a couple of men who were talking in a corridor of the State House—right in front of the door of Adjutant General Reed! They sounded like Copperhead sympathizers, to say the least, and Smith horning into their conversation, said loudly:

"Don't think that the war is lost because Lee retired into Virginia after Gettysburg. He'll be back in the Spring, and the minute he crosses the Potomac there will be an uprising in the Middle West that will kill the spirit of the North. Then, Mr. Malone, you Breckenridge men will be back in the saddle, and the Yankee rag will come down to stay!"

"That's treasonable talk, Mr. Smith." Malone backed away. "I—"

The door Malone had been watching was slammed open. A man shouted, "Treasonable talk, Malone! That's hanging talk!"

"So I said, General Reed." Malone gulped. "Just what I said."

"Who are you?" Reed demanded, eyes stabbing Bill.

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"I'm Bill Smith. And you don't need to talk to me about treasonable talk. I lived in Oregon until I sucked in all the big gab in '61. I went East to enlist, and what'd I get? A musket ball that gives me hell! It's time somebody came back and told the truth."

Of course all this was a cooked-up situation to convince the Copperheads that Smith was with them—and shortly he found himself in a nest of them—and the beautiful girl was among them—and some of them suspected Smith of being just what he was—a Federal spy. Ladies and gents, a dangerous spot! But only one of many gripping, suspenseful situations in this splendid story, THE DISTANT GUNS!

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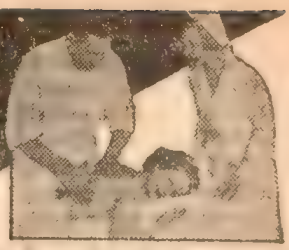

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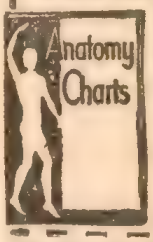

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think about this magazine, and the stories, long and short. That's how we determine what you like to read, you know. Here are excerpts from some of the letters on hand:

I have been a silent reader a long time, but couldn't keep still any longer. I like all the stories very much, but your picture of a hornet's nest and a hornet was too much. A hornet is short and dumpy and they swing their nest from a limb—and strike with nearly the speed of a bullet.

One more point—LEAD HORNETS, by Donald Bayne Hobart, was very good, but he said: "Allen halted his horse near the porch. He tied the horse to the hitch rail and went up the steps." Mr. Hobart should know that cowboys ground hitch their riding stock. Yours as long as HAM AND EGG lasts. *A. E. Harris, Cottonwood, Tenn.*

Thanks for your good letter, Mr. Harris. You're probably right about how cowboys anchor their mounts—most of the time. But in the old days every saloon had its hitchrail out front. But mebbe punchers tied their horses there when they wouldn't do it elsewhere, because they never knew when a gun ruckus might bust out, in or around such a gathering place, and scare their horses into a fast move away from there. And if there was anything a puncher hated worse than something else, it was to find himself on foot—anywhere—any time!

After just reading POPULAR WESTERN I had to write and say it's one of the best magazines I ever read. Sheriff Blue Steele is my favorite, but the stories are all fine. Please keep up the good work.—*Phyllis K. Renn.*

Nice going, Phyllis. Steele is popular with a lot of our girl readers, we find. There was really something about those upstanding, hard-fighting, straight-shootin' lawmen of the old frontier that won them both respect and admiration. Write us again, won't you? We're always glad to hear.

Why is it that nearly always, when a fight breaks out in a Western story, it happens in a saloon? This isn't a gripe, because I really like your stories, and I think you're getting out a grand book. But I've just happened to notice that guns seem to bang more often in saloons than anywhere else.—*Robert Bingham, New Orleans, La.*

Maybe, Bob, there was frequently a shootin' affair in or near a saloon because the saloon was a sort of club where men got together more often than anywhere else. It

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was a kind of central point, too, and you could expect, sooner or later, to find your friends there—and your enemies. When it was the latter, then many times the irons came out of leather and gunsmoke swirled around the hanging kerosene lamps. Tough days, those—and tough men, made of steel and whang-leather.

I like POPULAR WESTERN, especially Blue Steele and Shorty, and Joe Archibald's stories But all your writers are good. And, you know, the more I read Westerns, the greater my respect for that great old product called "leather." Saddles, bridles, braided rawhide, boots, belts, holsters—a lot of the things without which the West could never have been the West depended on leather. Just put your imagination to work, and see if you can imagine a frontier without it.—*Bart Saginaw, Dallas, Tex.*

You're quite right, Bart. Without leather there could have been no frontier as we know it. It has always been a great and useful product—and still is!

That's it for this time, folks. More when it's time for another issue. Meanwhile, get out the pen and ink, or unlimber the pencil or the typewriter and drop us a line—two lines—even three! We're saying thanks in advance—and counting on you. Just address The Editor, POPULAR WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Hasta manana!

—THE EDITOR.

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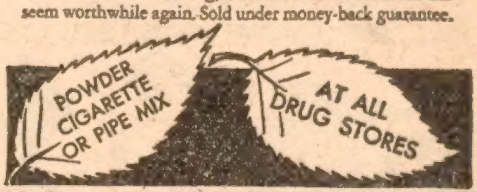

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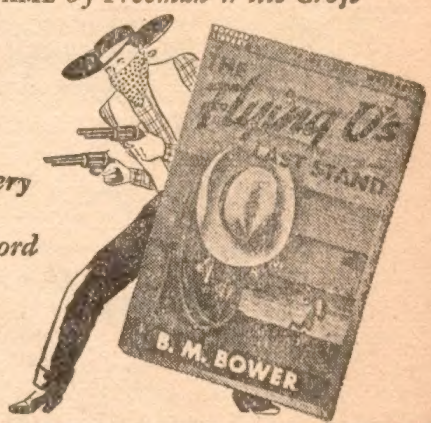

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